

THE POETRY
OF
ROBERT BROWNING

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Robert Browning

The Poetry
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Robert Browning

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CHAPTER I

BROWNING AND TENNYSON

PARNASSUS, Apollo's mount, has two peaks, and on these, for sixty years, from 1830 to 1890,* two poets sat, till their right to these lofty peaks became unchallenged. Beneath them, during these years, on the lower knolls of the mount of song, many new poets sang; with diverse instruments, on various subjects, and in manifold ways. They had their listeners; the Muses were also their visitants; but none of them ventured seriously to dispute the royal summits where Browning and Tennyson sat, and smiled at one another across the vale between.

Both began together; and the impulses which came to them from the new and excited world which opened its fountains in and about 1832 continued to impel them till the close of their lives. While the poetic world altered around them, while two generations of poets made new schools of poetry, they remained, for the most part, unaffected by these schools. There is nothing of

* I state it roughly. The *Poems of Two Brothers* appeared in 1826, Tennyson's first single volume in 1830, his second in 1833, his last in 1892. Browning's first poem was issued in 1833, his last in 1890. *Paracelsus*, in which his genius clearly disclosed itself, was published in 1835,* while Tennyson, seven years later, proved his mastership in the two volumes of 1842.

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Arnold and Clough, of Swinburne,* Rossetti or Morris, or of any of the others, in Browning or Tennyson. There is nothing even of Mrs. Browning in Browning. What changes took place in them were wrought, first, by the natural growth of their own character; secondly, by the natural development of their art-power; and thirdly, by the slow decaying of that power. They were, in comparison with the rest, curiously uninfluenced by the changes of the world around them. The main themes, with which they began, they retained to the end. Their methods, their instruments, their way of feeling into the world of man and of nature, their relation to the doctrines of God and of Man, did not, though on all these matters they held diverse views, alter with the alteration of the world. But this is more true of Browning than of Tennyson. The political and social events of those years touched Tennyson, as we see from *Maud* and the *Princess*, but his way of looking at them was not the way of a contemporary. It might have been predicted from his previous career and work. Then the new movements of Science and Criticism which disturbed Clough and Arnold so deeply, also troubled Tennyson, but not half so seriously. He staggered for a time under the attack on his old conceptions, but he never yielded to it. He was angry with himself for every doubt that beset him, and angry with the Science and Criticism which disturbed the ancient ideas he was determined not to change. Finally, he rested where he had been when he wrote *In Memoriam*.

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may more, where he had been when he began to write.

There were no such intervals in Browning's thought. One could scarcely say from his poetry, except in a very few places, that he was aware of the social changes of his time, or of the scientific and critical movement which; while he lived, so profoundly modified both theology and religion.* *Asolando*, in 1890, strikes the same chords, but more feebly, which *Paracelsus* struck in 1835.

But though in, this lofty apartness and self-unity, Browning and Tennyson may fairly be said to be at one, in themselves and in their song they were different. There could scarcely be two characters, two musics, two minds, two methods in art, two imaginations, more distinct and contrasted than those which lodged in these men—and the object of this introduction is to bring out this contrast, with the purpose of placing in a clearer light some of the peculiar elements in the poetry of Browning, and in his position as a poet.

* *A Death in the Desert* touches on the doubts which, when it was written, had gathered from historical criticism round the subject-matter of the Gospels, but the prophetic answer of St. John is not critical. It is Browning's personal reply to the critics, and is based on his own religious philosophy. The critical part of the argument is left untouched, and the answer is given from the poet's plane. It is the same when in the *Parleyings with certain People* Furini is made to embody Browning's belief in a personal God in contradistinction with the mere evolutionist. He does not argue the points. He places one doctrine over against the other and bids the reader choose. Moreover, he claims his view as his own alone. He seeks to impose it on no one.

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1. Their public fate was singularly different. In 1842 Tennyson, with his two volumes of *Collected Poems*, made his position. The *Princess*, in 1847, increased his reputation. In 1850, *In Memoriam* raised him, it was said, above all the poets of his time, and the book was appreciated, read and loved by the greater part of the English-speaking world. The success and popular fame which now followed were well deserved and wisely borne. They have endured and will endure. A host of imitators, who caught his music and his manner, filled the groves and ledges which led up to the peak on which he lived. His side of Parnassus was thronged.

It was quite otherwise with his brother-poet. Only a few clear-eyed persons cared to read *Paracelsus*, which appeared in 1835. *Strafford*, Browning's first drama, had a little more vogue; it was acted for a while. When *Sordello*, that strange child of genius, was born in 1840, those who tried to read its first pages declared they were incomprehensible. It seems that critics in those days had either less intelligence than we have, or were more impatient and less attentive, for not only *Sordello* but even *In Memoriam* was said to be exceedingly obscure.

Then, from 1841 to 1846, Browning published at intervals a series of varied poems and dramas, under the title of *Bells and Pomegranates*. These, one might imagine, would have grasped the heart of any public which had a care for poetry. Among them were such diverse poems as *Pippa Passes*;

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A Blot in the 'Scutcheon ; Saul ; The Pied Piper of Hamelin ; My Last Duchess ; Waring. I only mention a few (all different in note, subject and manner from one another), in order to mark the variety and range of imaginative power displayed in this wonderful set of little books. The Bells of poetry's music, hung side by side with the golden Pomegranates of thought, made the fringe of the robe of this high priest of song. Rarely have imagination and intellect, ideal faith and the sense which handles daily life, passion and quietude, the impulse and self-mastery of an artist, the joy of nature and the fates of men, grave tragedy and noble grotesque, been mingled together more fully—bells for the pleasure and fruit for the food of man.

Yet, on the whole, they fell dead on the public. A few, however, loved them, and all the poems were collected in 1849. *In Memoriam* and this Collected Edition of Browning issued almost together ; but with how different a fate and fame we see most plainly in the fact that Browning can scarcely be said to have had any imitators. The groves and ledges of his side of Apollo's mountain were empty, save for a few enchanted listeners, who said : " This is our music, and here we build our tent."

As the years went on, these readers increased in number, but even when the volumes entitled *Men and Women* were published in 1855, and the *Dramatis Personæ* in 1864, his followers were but a little company. For all this neglect Browning

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cared as a bird cares who sings for the love of singing, and who never muses in himself whether the wood is full or not of listeners. Being always a true artist, he could not stop versing and playing ; and not one grain of villain envy touched his happy heart when he looked across the valley to Tennyson. He loved his mistress Art, and his love made him always joyful in creating.

At last his time came, but it was not till nearly twenty years after the Collected Poems of 1849 that *The Ring and the Book* astonished the reading public so much by its intellectual *tour de force* that it was felt to be unwise to ignore Browning any longer. His past work was now discovered, read and praised. It was not great success or world-wide fame that he attained, but it was pleasant to him, and those who already loved his poems rejoiced with him. Before he died he was widely read, never so much as Tennyson, but far more than he had ever expected. It had become clear to all the world that he sat on a rival height with Tennyson, above the rest of his fellow-poets.

Their public fate, then, was very different. Tennyson had fifty years of recognition, Browning barely ten. And to us who now know Browning this seems a strange thing. Had he been one of the smaller men, a modern specialist like Arnold or Rossetti, we could better understand it. But Browning's work was not limited to any particular or temporary phase of human nature. He set himself to represent, as far as he could, all types of human nature ; and, more audacious still, types

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taken from many diverse ages, nations and climates. He told us of times and folk as far apart as Caliban and Cleon, as Karshish and Waring, as Balaustion and Fifine, as St. John and Bishop Blougram. The range and the contrasts of these subjects are equally great. And he did this work with a searching analysis, a humorous keenness, a joyous boldness, and an opulent imagination at once penetrative and passionate. When, then, we realize this as we realise it now, we are the more astonished that appreciation of him lingered so long. Why did it not come at first, and why did it come in the end?

The first answer to that question is a general one. During the years between 1860 and 1890, and especially during the latter half of these years, science and criticism were predominant. Their determination to penetrate to the roots of things made a change in the general direction of thought and feeling on the main subjects of life. Analysis became dearer to men than synthesis, reasoning than imagination. Doubtful questions were submitted to intellectual decision alone. The Understanding, to its great surprise, was employed on the investigation of the emotions, and even the artists were drawn in this direction. They, too, began to dissect the human heart. Poets and writers of fiction, students of human nature, were keenly interested, not so much in our thoughts and feelings as in exposing how and why we thought or felt in this or that fashion. In such analysis they seemed to touch the primal sources

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of life. They desired to dig about the tree of humanity and to describe all the windings of its roots and fibres—not much caring whether they withered the tree for a time—rather than to describe and sing its outward beauty, its varied foliage, and its ruddy fruit. And this liking to investigate the hidden inwardness of motives—which many persons, weary of self-contemplation, wisely prefer to keep hidden—ran through the practice of all the arts. They became, on the whole, less emotional, more intellectual. The close marriage between passion and thought, without whose cohabitation no work of genius is born in the arts, was dissolved ; and the intellect of the artist often worked by itself, and his emotion by itself. Some of the parthenogenetic children of these divorced powers were curious products, freaks, even monsters of literature, in which the dry, cynical, or vivisectioning temper had full play, or the naked, lustful, or cruel exposure of the emotions in ugly, unnatural, or morbid forms was glorified. They made an impudent claim to the name of Art, but they were nothing better than disagreeable Science. But this was an extreme deviation of the tendency. The main line it took was not so detestable. It was towards the ruthless analysis of life, and of the soul of man ; a part, in fact, of the general scientific movement. The outward forms of things charmed writers less than the motives which led to their making. The description of the tangled emotions and thoughts of the inner life, before any action took place, was more pleasurable to the

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writer, and easier, than any description of their final result in act. This was borne to a wearisome extreme in fiction, and in these last days a comfortable reaction from it has arisen. In poetry it did not last so long. Morris called us out of it. But long before it began, long before its entrance into the arts, Browning, who on another side of his genius delighted in the representation of action, anticipated in poetry, and from the beginning of his career, twenty, even thirty years before it became pronounced in literature, this tendency to the intellectual analysis of human nature. When he began it, no one cared for it; and *Paracelsus*, *Sordello* and the soul-dissecting poems in *Bells and Pomegranates* fell on an unheeding world. But Browning did not heed the unheeding of the world. He had the courage of his aims in art, and while he frequently shaped in his verse the vigorous movement of life, even to its moments of fierce activity, he went on quietly, amid the silence of the world, to paint also the slowly interwoven and complex pattern of the inner life of men. And then, when the tendency of which I speak had collared the interest of society, society, with great and ludicrous amazement, found him out. "Here is a man," it said, "who has been doing in poetry for the last thirty years the very thing of which we are so fond, and who is doing it with delightful and varied subtlety. We will read him now." So Browning, anticipating by thirty years the drift of the world, was not read at first; but, afterwards, the world having reached him, he became a favoured poet.

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However, fond as he was of metaphysical analysis, he did not fall into the extremes into which other writers carried it. *Paracelsus* is, indeed, entirely concerned with the inner history of a soul, but *Sordello* combines with a similar history a tale of political and warlike action in which men and women, like Salinguerra and Palma, who live in outward work rather than in inward thought, are described ; while in poems like *Pippa Passes* and some of the Dramas, emotion and thought, intimately interwoven, are seen blazing, as it were, into a lightning of swift deeds. Nor are other poems wanting, in which, not long analysis, but short passions, fiery outbursts of thought, taking immediate form, are represented with astonishing intensity.

2. This second remarkable power of his touches the transition which has begun to carry us, in the last few years, from the subjective to the objective in art. The time came, and quite lately, when art, weary of intellectual and minute investigation, turned to realise, not the long inward life of a soul with all its motives laid bare, but sudden moments of human passion, swift and unoutlined impressions on the senses, the moody aspects of things, flared-out concentrations of critical hours of thought and feeling which years perhaps of action and emotion had brought to the point of eruption. Impressionism was born in painting, poetry, sculpture and music.

It was curious that, when we sought for a master who had done this in the art of poetry, we found

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that Browning—who had in long poems done the very opposite of impressionism—had also, in a number of short poems, anticipated impressionist art by nearly forty years. *Porphyria's Lover*, many a scene in *Sordello*, *My Last Duchess*, *The Laboratory*, *Home Thoughts from Abroad*, are only a few out of many. It is pleasant to think of the ultimate appearance of Waring, flashed out for a moment on the sea, only to disappear. In method, swiftness and colour, but done in verse, it is an impressionist picture, as vivid in transient scenery as in colour. He did the same sort of work in poems of nature, of human life, of moments of passion, of states of the soul. That is another reason why he was not read at first, and why he is read now. He was impressionist long before Impressionism arrived. When it arrived he was found out. And he stood alone, for Tennyson is never impressionist, and never could have been. Neither was Swinburne nor Arnold, Morris nor Rossetti.

3. Again, in the leisured upper ranges of thought and emotion, and in the extraordinary complexity of human life which arose, first, out of the more intimate admixture of all classes in our society; and secondly, out of the wider and more varied world-life which increased means of travel and knowledge afforded to men, Tennyson's smooth, melodious, simple development of art-subjects did not represent the clashing complexity of human life, whether inward in the passions, the intellect or the soul, or in the active movement of the world.

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And the other poets were equally incapable of representing this complexity of which the world became clearly conscious. Arnold tried to express its beginnings, and failed, because he tried to explain instead of representing them. He wrote about them; he did not write them down. Nor did he really belong to this novel, quick, variegated, involved world which was so pleased with its own excitement and entanglement. He was the child of a world which was then passing away, out of which life was fading, which was tired like Obermann, and sought peace in reflective solitudes. Sometimes he felt, as in *The New Age*, the pleasure of the coming life of the world, but he was too weary to share in it, and he claimed quiet. But chiefly he saw the disturbance, the unregulated life; and, unable to realise that it was the trouble and wildness of youth, he mistook it for the trouble of decay. He painted it as such. But it was really young, and out of it broke all kinds of experiments in social, religious, philosophical and political thought, such as we have seen and read of for the last thirty years. Art joined in the experiments of this youthful time. It opened a new fountain and sent forth from it another stream, to echo this attempting, clanging and complicated society; and this stream did not flow like a full river, making large or sweet melody, but like a mountain torrent thick with rocks, the thunderous whirlpools of whose surface were white with foam. Changing and sensational scenery haunted its lower banks where it became dangerously navigable. Strange

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boats, filled with outlandish figures, who played on unknown instruments, and sang of deeds and passions remote from common life, sailed by on its stormy waters. Few were the concords, many the discords, and some of the discords were never resolved. But in one case at least—in the case of Browning's poetry, and in very many cases in the art of music—out of the discords emerged at last a full melody of steady thought and controlled emotion as (to recapture my original metaphor) the rude, interrupted music of the mountain stream reaches full and concordant harmony when it flows in peace through the meadows of the valley.

These complex and intercleaving conditions of thought and passion into which society had grown Browning represented from almost the beginning of his work. When society became conscious of them—there it found him. And, amazed, it said, "Here is a man who forty years ago lived in the midst of our present life and wrote about it." They felt that the wild, loud complexity of their world was expressed in his verse; and yet were dimly conscious, to their consolation, that he was aware of a central peace where the noise was quieted and the tangle unravelled.

For Browning not only represented "this discordant, varied hurly-burly of life, but also, out of all the discords which he described, and which, when he chose, even his rhythms and words, arrangements realised in sound, he drew a concordant melody at last, and gave to a world, troubled

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with itself, the hope of a great concert into which all the discords ran, and where they were resolved. And this hope for the individual and the race was one of the deepest elements in Browning's religion. It was also the hope of Tennyson, but Tennyson was often uncertain of it, and bewailed the uncertainty. Browning was certain of his hope, and for the most part resolved his discords. Even when he did not resolve them, he firmly believed that they would be resolved. This, his essential difference from the other poets of the last fifty years, marks not only his apartness from the self-ignorance of English society, and the self-sceptical scepticism which arises from that self-ignorance, but also how steadily assured was the foundation of his spiritual life. In the midst of the shifting storms of doubt and trouble, of mockery, contradiction, and assertion on religious matters, he stood unremoved. Whatever men may think of his faith and his certainties, they reveal the strength of his character, the enduring courage of his soul, and the inspiring joyousness that, born of his strength, characterised him to the last poem he wrote. Whilst the other poets were tossing on the sea of unresolved Question, he rested, musing and creating, on a green island whose rocks were rooted on the ocean-bed, and wondered, with the smiling tolerance of his life-long charity, how his fellows were of so little faith, and why the sceptics made so much noise. He would have reversed the Psalmist's cry. He would have said, "Thou art not cast down, O my soul; thou art not disquieted

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within me. Thou hast hoped in God, who is the light of thy countenance, and thy God."

. At first the world, enamoured of its own complex discords, and pleased, like boys in the street, with the alarms it made, only cared for that part of Browning which represented the tangle and the clash, and ignored his final melody. But of late it has begun, tired of the restless clatter of intellectual atoms, to desire to hear, if possible, the majestic harmonies in which the discords are resolved. And at this point many at present and many more in the future will find their poetic and religious satisfaction in Browning. At the very end, then, of the nineteenth century, in a movement which had only just begun, men said to themselves, "Browning felt beforehand what we are beginning to hope for, and wrote of it fifty, even sixty years ago. No one cared then for him, but we care now."

Again, though he thus anticipated the movements of the world, he did not, like the other poets, change his view about Nature, Man and God. He conceived that view when he was young, and he did not alter it. Hence, he did not follow or reflect from year to year the opinions of his time on these great matters. When *Paracelsus* was published in 1835 Browning had fully thought out, and in that poem fully expressed, his theory of God's relation to man, and of man's relation to the universe around him, to his fellow men, and to the world beyond. It was a theory which was original, if any theory can be so called. At least, its form, as he expressed it, was clearly original. Roughly

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sketched in *Pauline*, fully rounded in *Paracelsus*, it held and satisfied his mind till the day of his death. But Tennyson had no clear theory about Man or Nature or God when he began, nor was he afterwards, save perhaps when he wrote the last stanzas of *In Memoriam*, a fully satisfied citizen of the city that has foundations. He believed in that city, but he could not always live in it. He grew into this or that opinion about the relations of God and man, and then grew out of it. He held now this, now that view of nature, and of man in contact with nature. There was always battle in his soul ; although he won his battle in the end, he had sixty years of war. Browning was at peace, firm-fixed. It is true the inward struggle of Tennyson enabled him to image from year to year his own time better than Browning did. It is true this struggle enabled him to have great variety in his art-work when it was engaged with the emotions which belong to doubt and faith ; but it also made him unable to give to his readers that sense of things which cannot be shaken, of faith in God and in humanity wholly independent, in its depths, of storms on the surface of this mortal life, which was one of Browning's noblest legacies to that wavering, faithless, pessimistic, analysis-tormented world through which we have fought our way, and out of which we are emerging.

4. The danger in art, or for an artist, of so settled a theory is that in expression it tends to monotony ; and sometimes, when we find almost every poem of Browning's running up into his

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theory, we arrive at the borders of the Land of Weary-men. But he seems to have been aware of this danger, and to have conquered it. He meets it by the immense variety of the subjects he chooses and of the scenery in which he places them. I do not think he ever repeats any one of his examples, though he always repeats his theory. And the pleasant result is that we can either ignore the theory if we like, or rejoice over its universal application, or, beyond it altogether, be charmed and excited by the fresh examples alone. And they are likely to charm, at least by variety, for they are taken from all ages of history ; from as many diverse phases of human act, character and passion as there are poems which concern them ; from many periods of the arts ; from most of the countries of Europe, from France, Germany, Spain, Italy (rarely from England), with their specialised types of race and of landscape ; and from almost every class of educated modern society. Moreover, he had a guard within his own nature against the danger of this monotony. It was the youthful freshness with which, even in advanced age, he followed his rapid impulses to art-creation. No one was a greater child than he in the quickness with which he received a sudden call to poetry from passing events or scenes, and in the eagerness with which he seized them as subjects. He took the big subjects now and then which the world expects to be taken, and treated them with elaborate thought and steadfast feeling, but he was more often like the girl in his half-dramatic

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poem, whom the transient occurrences and sights of the day touched into song. He picked up his subjects as a man culls flowers in a mountain walk, moved by an ever-recurring joy and fancy in them—a book on a stall, a bust in an Italian garden, a face seen at the opera, the market clatter of a Tuscan town, a story told by the roadside in Brittany, a picture in some Accademia—so that, though the ground-thought might incur the danger of dulness through repetition, the joy of the artist so filled the illustration, and his freshness of invention was so delighted with itself, that even to the reader the theory seemed like a new star.

In this way he kept the use of having an unwavering basis of thought which gave unity to his sixty years of work, and yet avoided the peril of monotony. An immense diversity animated his unity, filled it with gaiety and brightness, and secured impulsiveness of fancy. This also differentiates him from Tennyson, who often wanted freshness; who very rarely wrote on a sudden impulse, but after long and careful thought; to whose seriousness we cannot always climb with pleasure; who played so little with the world. These defects in Tennyson had the excellences which belong to them in art, just as these excellences in Browning had, in art, their own defects. We should be grateful for the excellences, and not trouble ourselves about the defects. However, neither the excellences nor the defects concern us in the present discussion. It is the contrast between the two men on which we dwell.

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5. The next point of contrast, which will further illustrate why Browning was not read of old but is now read, has to do with historical criticism. There arose, some time ago, as part of the scientific and critical movement of the last forty years, a desire to know and record accurately the early life of peoples, pastoral, agricultural, and in towns, and the beginning of their arts and knowledges; and not only their origins, but the whole history of their development. A close, critical investigation was made of the origins of each people; accurate knowledge, derived from contemporary documents, of their life, laws, customs and language, was attained; the facts of their history were separated from their mythical and legendary elements; the dress, the looks of men, the climate of the time, the physical aspects of their country—all the skeleton of things was fitted together, bone to bone. And for a good while this merely critical school held the field. It did admirable and necessary work. • •

But when it was done, art claimed its place in this work. The desire sprang up among historians to conceive all this history in the imagination, to shape vividly its scenery, to animate and individualise its men and women, to paint the life of the human soul in it, to clothe it in flesh and blood, to make its feet move and its eyes flash—but to do all these things within the limits of the accurate knowledge which historical criticism had defined. “Let us saturate ourselves,” said the historians, “with clear knowledge of the needful facts, and

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then, without violation of our knowledge, imagine the human life, the landscape, the thinking and feeling of a primæval man, of his early religion, of his passions ; of Athens when the Persian came, of Rome when the Republic was passing into the Empire, of a Provincial in Spain or Britain, of a German town in the woods by the river. Let us see in imagination as well as in knowledge an English settlement on the Welsh border, an Italian mediæval town when its art was being born, a Jewish village when Christ wandered into its streets, a musician or a painter's life at a time when Greek art was decaying, or when a new impulse like the Renaissance or the French Revolution came upon the world." When that effort of the historians had established itself, and we have seen it from blossoming to fruitage, people began to wonder that no poet had ever tried to do this kind of work. It seemed eminently fitted for a poet's hand, full of subjects alluring to the penetrative imagination. It needed, of course, some scholarship, for it demanded accuracy in its grasp of the main ideas of the time to be represented ; but that being given, immense opportunities remained for pictures of human life full of colour, thought and passions ; for subtle and brilliant representations of the eternal desires and thinkings of human nature as they were governed by the special circumstances of the time in which the poem was placed ; or for the concentration into a single poem, gathered round one person, of the ideas whose new arrival formed a crisis in the history of art.

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Men looked for this in Tennyson and did not find it. His Greek and mediæval poems were modernised. Their imaginative work was uncritical. But when the historians and the critics of art and of religious movements happened at last to look into Browning, they discovered, to their delight and wonder, that he had been doing, with a curious knowledge, this kind of work for many years. He had anticipated the results of that movement of the imagination in historical work which did not exist when he began to write; he had worked that mine, and the discovery of this made another host of people readers of his poetry.

We need scarcely give examples of this. *Sordello*, in 1840 (long before the effort of which we speak began), was such a poem—the history of a specialised soul, with all its scenery and history vividly mediæval. Think of the *Spanish Cloister*, *The Laboratory*, *A Grammarian's Funeral*, the *Bishop orders his Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church*, poems, each of which paints an historical period or a vivid piece of its life. Think of *The Ring and the Book*, with all the world of Rome painted to the life, and all the soul of the time!

The same kind of work was done for phases and periods of the arts from Greek times to the Renaissance, I may even say, from the Renaissance to the present day. *Balaustion's Prologue* concentrates the passage of dramatic poetry from Sophocles to Euripides. *Aristophanes' Apology* realises the wild licence in which art and freedom died in Athens—their greatness in their ruin—and

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the passionate sorrow of those who loved what had been so beautiful. *Cleon* takes us into a later time when men had ceased to be original, and life and art had become darkened by the pain of the soul. We pass on to two different periods of the Renaissance in *Fra Lippo Lippi* and in *Andrea del Sarto*, and are carried further through the centuries of art when we read *Abt Vogler* and *A Toccata of Galuppi's*. Each of these poems is a concentrated, accurate, piece of art-history, with the addition to it of the human soul.

Periods and phases of religious history are equally realised. *Caliban upon Setebos* begins the record—that philosophic savage who makes his God out of himself. Then follows study after study, from *A Death in the Desert* to *Bishop Blougram's Apology*. Some carry us from early Christianity through the mediæval faith; others lead us through the Paganism of the Renaissance and strange shows of Judaism to Browning's own conception of religion in the present day contrasted with those of the popular religion in *Christmas-Day* and *Easter-Day*.

Never, in poetry, was the desire of the historical critic for accuracy of fact and portraiture, combined with vivid presentation of life, so fully satisfied. No wonder Browning was not read off old; but it is no wonder, when the new History was made, when he was once found out, that he passed from a few to a multitude of readers.

6. Another contrast appears at the very beginning of their career. Tennyson, in his two earliest

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books in 1830 and 1833, though clearly original in some poems, had clinging round his singing robes some of the rags of the past. He wrote partly in the weak and sentimental strain of the poets between 1822 and 1832. Browning, on the contrary, sprang at once into an original poetic life of his own. *Pauline* was unfinished, irregular in form, harsh, abrupt, and overloaded, but it was also entirely fresh and distinct. The influence of Shelley echoes in it, but much more in admiration than in imitation of him. The matter, the spirit of the poem were his own, and the verse-movement was his own. Had Browning been an imitator, the first thing he would have imitated would have been the sweet and rippling movement of Shelley's melodies. But the form of his verse, such as it was, arose directly out of his own nature and was as original as his matter. Tennyson grew into originality, Browning leaped into it; born, not of other poets, but of his own will. He begat himself. It had been better for his art, so far as technical excellence is concerned, had he studied and imitated at first the previous masters. But he did not; and his dominant individuality, whole in itself and creating its own powers, separates him at the very beginning from Tennyson.

7. Tennyson became fully original, but he always admitted, and sometimes encouraged in himself, a certain vein of conventionality. He kept the opinions of the past in the matter of caste. He clung to certain political and social maxims, and could not see beyond them. He sometimes

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expressed them as if they were freshly discovered truths or direct emanations from the Deity of England. He belonged to a certain type of English society, and he rarely got out of it in his poetry. He inhabited a certain Park of morals, and he had no sympathy with any self-ethical life beyond its palings. What had been, what was proper and recognised, somewhat enslaved in Tennyson that distinctiveness and freedom of personality which is of so much importance in poetry, and which, had it had more liberty in Tennyson, would have made him a still greater poet than he was.

Browning, on the other hand—much more a person in society than Tennyson, much more a man of the world, and obeying in society its social conventions more than Tennyson—never allowed this to touch his poems. As the artist, he was quite free from the opinions, maxims, and class conventions of the past or the present. His poetry belongs to no special type of society, to no special nationality, to no separate *cæd* or church, to no settled standard of social morality. What his own thought and emotion urged him to say, he said with an absolute carelessness of what the world would say. And in this freedom he proceeded and prophesied the reaction of the last years of the nineteenth century against the tyranny of maxims and conventions in society, in morals, and in religion. That reaction has in many ways been carried beyond the proper limits of what is just and beautiful. But these excesses had to be, and

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the world is beginning to avoid them. What remains is the blessing of life set free, not altogether from the use of conventions, but from their tyranny and oppression, and lifted to a higher level, where the test of what is right and fitting in act, and just in thought, is not the opinion of society, but that Law of Love which gives us full liberty to develop our own nature and lead our own life in the way we think best, independent of all conventions, provided we do not injure the life of others, or violate any of the great moral and spiritual truths by obedience to which the progress of mankind is promoted and secured. Into that high and free region of thought and action Browning brought us long ago. Tennyson did not, save at intervals when the poet over-rode the man. This differentiates the men. But it also tells us why Browning was not read fifty years ago, when social conventions were tyrannous, and respectability a despot, and why he has been read for the last fifteen years and is read now.

8. There is another contrast between these poets. It is quite clear that Tennyson was a distinctively English poet and a patriotic poet; at times too much of a patriot to judge tolerantly, or to write fairly, about other countries. He had, at least, a touch of national contempt, even of national hatreds. His position towards France was much that of the British sailor of Nelson's time. His position towards Ireland was that of the bishop, who had been a schoolmaster, to the naughty curate who has a will of his own. His position

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towards Scotland was that of one who was aware that it had a geographical existence, and that a regiment in the English army which had a genius for fighting was drawn from its Highlands. He condescends to write a poem at Edinburgh, but then Edinburgh was of English origin and name. Even with that help he cannot be patient of the place. The poem is a recollection of an Italian journey, and he forgets in memories of the South—though surely Edinburgh might have awakened some romantic associations—

the clouded Forth,
The gloom which saddens Heaven and Earth,
The bitter East, the misty summer
And gray metropolis of the North.

Edinburgh is English in origin, but Tennyson did not feel England beyond the Border. There the Celt intruded, and he looked askance upon the Celt. The Celtic spirit smiled, and took its vengeance on him in its own way. It imposed on him, as his chief subject, a Celtic tale and a Celtic hero; and though he did his best to de-celticise the story, the vengeance lasts, for the more he did this the more he injured his work. However, being always a noble artist, he made a good fight for his insularity, and the expression of it harmonised with the pride of England in herself, alike with that which is just and noble in it, and with that which is neither the one nor the other.

Then, too, his scenery (with some exceptions, and those invented) was of his own land, and chiefly of the places where he lived. It was quite

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excellent, but it was limited. But, within the limit of England, it was steeped in the love of England; and so sweet and full is this love, and so lovely are its results in song, that every Englishman has, for this reason if for no other, a deep and just affection for Tennyson. Nevertheless, in that point also his poetry was insular. A fault in the poet, not in the poetry. Perhaps, from this passionate concentration, the poetry was all the lovelier.

Again, when Tennyson took a great gest of war as his subject, he took it exclusively from the history of his own land. No one would know from his writings that high deeds of sacrifice in battle had been done by other nations. He knew of them, but he did not care to write about them. Nor can we trace in his work any care for national struggles or national life beyond this island—except in a few sonnets and short pieces concerning Poland and Montenegro—an isolation of interests which cannot be imputed to any other great poet of the first part of the nineteenth century, excepting Keats, who had no British or foreign interests. Keats had no country save the country of Beauty.

At all these points Browning differed from Tennyson. He never displayed a special patriotism. On the contrary, he is more Italian than English, and he is more quick to see and sympathise with the national characteristics of Spain or France or Germany, than he is with those of England. No insular feeling prevented him from being just to foreigners, or from having a keen pleasure in writing about them. *Stratford* is the only play he

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wrote on an English subject, and it is rather a study of a character which might find its place in any aristocracy than of an English character. Even Pym and Hampden fail to be truly English; and it would have been difficult for any one but Browning to take their eminent English elements out of them. *Paracelsus* and *Sordello* belong to Germany and Italy, and there are scarcely three poems in the whole of the seven numbers of the *Bells and Pomegranates* which even refer to England. Italy is there, and chiefly Italy. In *De Gustibus* he contrasts himself with his friend who loves England :

Your ghost will walk, you lover of trees,
(If our loves remain)
In an English lane
By a cornfield-side a-flutter with poppies.

What I love best in all the world
Is a castle, precipice-encurled,
In a gash of the wind-grieved Apennine.

" Look for me, old fellow of mine, if I get out of the grave, in a seaside house in South Italy," and he describes the place and folk he loves, and ends :

Open my heart and you will see
Graved inside of it, " Italy."
Such lovers old are I and she :
So it always was, so shall ever be !

It is a poem written out of his very heart.

And then, the scenery ? It is not of our country at all. It is of many lands, but, above all, it is vividly Italian. There is no more minute and subtly-felt description of the scenery of a piece of village country between the mountains and the

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sea, with all its life, than in the poem called *The Englishman in Italy*. The very title is an outline of Browning's position in this matter. We find this English poet in France, in Syria, in Greece, in Spain, but not in England. We find Rome, Florence, Venice, Mantua, Verona, and forgotten towns among the Apennines painted with happy love in verse, but not an English town nor an English village. The flowers, the hills, the ways of the streams, the talk of the woods, the doings of the sea and the clouds in tempest and in peace, the aspects of the sky at noon, at sunrise and sunset, are all foreign, not English. The one little poem which is of English landscape is written by him in Italy (in a momentary weariness with his daily adoration), and under a green impulse. Delightful as it is, he would not have remained faithful to it for a day. Every one knows it, but that we may realise how quick he was to remember and to touch a corner of early Spring in England, on a soft and windy day—for all the blossoms are scattered—I quote it here. It is well to read his sole contribution (except in *Pauline* and a few scattered illustrations) to the scenery of his own country :

Oh, to be in England
Now that April's there,
And whoever wakes in England
Sees, some morning, unaware,
That the lowest boughs and the brushwood sheaf
Round the elm-tree bole are in tiny leaf,
While the chaffinch sings on the orchard bough
In England—now !
And after April, when May* follows,
And the whitethroat builds, and all the swallows ! *

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Hark ! where my blossomed pear-tree in the hedge
Leans to the field and scatters on the clover
Blossoms and dewdrops—at the bent spray's edge—
That's the wise thrush ; he sings each song twice over,
Lest you should think he never could recapture
The first fine careless rapture !
And though the fields look rough with hoary dew,
All will be gay, when noontide wakes anew
The buttercups, the little children's dower ;
—Far brighter than this gaudy melon-flower !

So it runs ; but it is only a momentary memory ;
and he knew, when he had done it, and to his
great comfort, that he was far away from England,
But when Tennyson writes of Italy—as, for in-
stance, in *Mariana in the South*—how apart he is !
How great is his joy when he gets back to England !

Then, again, when Browning was touched by the
impulse to write about a great deed in war, he does
not choose, like Tennyson, English subjects. The
Cavalier Tunes have no importance as patriot songs.
They are mere experiments. The poem, *How
They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix*, has
twice their vigour. His most intense war-incident
is taken from the history of the French wars under
Napoleon. The most ringing and swiftest poem of
personal dash and daring—and at sea, as if he was
tired of England's mistress-ship of the waves—a
poem one may set side by side with the fight of
The Revênge—is *Hervé Riel*. It is a tale of a Breton
sailor saving the French fleet from the English
with the sailor's mockery of England embedded
in it ; and Browning sent the hundred pounds
he got for it to the French, after the siege of
Paris.

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It was not that he did not honour his country, but that, as an artist, he loved more the foreign lands ; and that in his deepest life he belonged less to England than to the world of man. The great deeds of England did not prevent him from feeling, with as much keenness as Tennyson felt those of England, the great deeds of France and Italy, National self-sacrifice in critical hours, splendid courage in love and war, belonged he thought, to all peoples. Perhaps he felt, with Tennyson's insularity dominating his ears, that it was as well to put the other side. I think he might have done a little more for England. There is only one poem, out of all his huge production, which recognises the great deeds of our Empire in war ; and this did not come of a life-long feeling, such as he had for Italy, but from a sudden impulse which arose in him, as sailing by, he saw Trafalgar and Gibraltar, glorified and incarnadined by a battle-sunset :

Nobly, nobly Cape Saint Vincent to the North-west
died away ;

Sunset ran, one glorious blood-red, reeking into Cadiz
Bay ;

Bluish 'mid the burning water, full in face Trafalgar lay ;
In the dimmest North-east distance dawned Gibraltar
grand and gray ;

" Here and here did England help me : how can I help
England ? "—say.

Whoso turns as I, this evening, turn to God to praise and
pray,

While Jove's planet rises yonder, silent over Africa.

It is a little thing, and when it leaves the sunset it is poor. And there is twice the fervour of its sunset in the description of the sunrise at Asolo in *Pippa Passes*.

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Again, there is scarcely a trace in his work of any vital interest in the changes of thought and feeling in England during the sixty years of his life, such as appear everywhere in Tennyson. No one would know from his poetry (at least until the very end of his life, when he wrote *Francis Furini*) that the science of life and its origins had been revolutionised in the midst of his career, or, save in *A Death in the Desert*, that the whole aspect of theology had been altered, or that the democratic movement had taken so many new forms. He showed to these English struggles neither attraction nor repulsion. They scarcely existed for him—transient elements of the world, merely national, not universal. Nor did the literature or art of his own country engage him half so much as the literature and art of Italy. He loved both. Few were better acquainted with English poetry, or revered it more; but he loved it, not because it was English, but of that world of imagination which has no special country. He cared also for English art, but he gave all his personal love to the art of Italy. Nor does he write, as Tennyson loved to do, of the daily life of the English farmer, squire, miller and sailor, and of English sweet-hearting, nor of the English park and brook and village-green and their indwellers, but of the work-girl at Asolo, and the Spanish monk in his garden, and the Arab riding through the desert, and of the Duchess and her servant, flying through the mountains of Moldavia, and of the poor painters at Fano and Florence, and of the threadbare poet at

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Valladolid, and of the peasant-girl who fed the Tuscan outlaw, and of the poor grammarian who died somewhere in Germany (as I think Browning meant it), and of the Jews at Rome, and of the girl at Pornic with the gold hair and the peasant's hand, and of a hundred others, none of whom are English. All his common life, all his love-making, sorrow and joy among the poor, are outside this country, with perhaps two exceptions; and neither of these has the English note which sounds so soft and clear in Tennyson. This is curious enough, and it is probably one of the reasons why English people for a long time would have so little to do with him. All the same, he was himself woven of England even more than of Italy. The English elements in his character and work are more than the Italian. His intellect was English, and had the English faults as well as the English excellences. His optimism was English; his steadfast fighting quality, his unyielding energy, his directness, his desire to get to the root of things, were English. His religion was the excellent English compromise or rather balance of dogma, practice and spirituality which laymen make for their own life. His bold sense of personal freedom was English. His constancy to his theories, whether of faith or art, was English; his roughness of form was positively early Teutonic.

Then his wit, his *esprit*,* his capacity for induing

* Much has been said of the humour of Browning. But it is rather wit than humour which we perceive. The gentle pathos which belongs to humour, the pitiful turn of the humourist upon himself, his smile at his own follies

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the skin and the soul of other persons at remote times of history ; his amazing inventiveness and the ease of it, at which point he beats Tennyson out of the field ; his play, so high fantastical, with his subjects, and the way in which the pleasure he took in this play overmastered his literary self-control ; his fantastic games with metre and with rhyme, his want of reverence for the rules of his art ; his general lawlessness, belong to one side, but to one side only, of the Celtic nature. But the ardour of the man, the pathos of his passion and the passion of his pathos, his impulse towards the infinite and the constant rush he made into its indefinite realms ; the special set of his imagination towards the fulfilment of perfection in Love ; his vision of Nature as in colour, rather than in light and shade ; his love of beauty and the kind of beauty that he loved ; his extraordinary delight in all kinds of art as the passionate shaping of part of the unapproachable Beauty—these were all old Italian.

Then I do not know whether Browning had any Jewish blood in his body by descent, but he

and those of mankind, the half light, like that of evening, in which humour dwells, are wanting in Browning. It is true he has the charity of humour, though not its pathetic power. 'Pity for the follies and sins of men does fill Browning's poetry. But, all the same, he is too keen, too brilliant, too fierce at times for a humourist. The light in which we see the foolish, fantastic, amusing or contemptible things of life is too bright for humour. He is a Wit—with charity—not a humourist. As for Tennyson, save in his Lincolnshire poems and *Will Waterproof's Soliloquy*, he was strangely devoid either of humour or of wit.

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certainly had Jewish elements in his intellect, spirit and character. His sense of an ever-victorious Righteousness at the centre of the universe, whom one might always trust and be untroubled, was Jewish, but he carried it forward with the New Testament and made the Righteousness identical with absolute Love. Yet, even in this, the Old Testament elements were more plainly seen than is usual in Christian poets. The appearance of Christ as all-conquering love in *Easter-Day* and the scenery which surrounds him are such as Ezekiel might have conceived and written. Then his intellectual subtlety, the metaphysical minuteness of his arguments, his fondness for parenthesis, the way in which he pursued the absolute while he loaded it with a host of relatives, and conceived the universal through a multitude of particulars, the love he had for remote and unexpected analogies, the craft with which his intellect persuaded him that he could insert into his poems thoughts, illustrations, legends, and twisted knots of reasoning which a fine artistic sense would have omitted, were all as Jewish as the Talmud. There was also a Jewish quality in his natural description, in the way he invented diverse phrases to express different aspects of the same phenomenon, a thing for which the Jews were famous; and in the way in which he peopled what he described with animal life of all kinds, another remarkable habit of the Jewish poets. Moreover, his pleasure in intense colour, in splashes and blots of scarlet and crimson and deep blue and glowing green; in precious stones

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for the sake of their colour—sapphire, ruby, emerald, chrysolite, pearl, onyx, chalcedony (he does not care for the diamond); in the flame of gold, in the crimson of blood, is Jewish. So also is his love of music, of music especially as bringing us nearest to what is ineffable in God, of music with human aspiration in its heart and sounding in its phrases. It was this Jewish element in Browning, in all its many forms, which caused him to feel with and to write so much about the Jews in his poetry. The two poems in which he most fully enshrines his view of human life, as it may be in the thought of God and as it ought to be conceived by us, are both in the mouth of Jews, of *Rabbi Ben Ezra* and *Jochanan Hakkadosh*. In *Filippo Baldinucci* the Jew has the best of the battle; his courtesy, intelligence and physical power are contrasted with the coarseness, feeble brains and body of the Christians. In *Holy-Cross Day*, the Jew, forced to listen to a Christian sermon, begins with coarse and angry mockery, but passes into solemn thought and dignified phrase. No English poet, save perhaps Shakespeare, whose exquisite sympathy could not leave even Shylock unpitied, had spoken of the Jew with compassion, knowledge and admiration, till Browning wrote of him. The Jew lay deep in Browning. He was a complex creature; and who would understand or rather feel him rightly, must be able to feel something of the nature of all these races in himself. But Tennyson was not complex. He was English and only English.

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But to return from this digression. Browning does not stand alone among the poets in the apartness from his own land of which I have written. Byron is partly with him. Where Byron differs from him is, first, in this—that Byron had no poetic love for any special country as Browning had for Italy ; and, secondly, that his country was, alas, himself, until at the end, sick of his self-patriotism, he gave himself to Greece. Keats, on the other hand, had no country except, as I have said, the country of Loveliness. Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley were not exclusively English. Shelley belonged partly to Italy, but chiefly to that future of mankind in which separate nationalities and divided patriotisms are absorbed. Wordsworth and Coleridge, in their early days, were patriots of humanity ; they actually for a time abjured their country. Even in his later days Wordsworth's sympathies reach far beyond England. But none of these were so distinctively English as Tennyson, and none of them were so outside of England as Browning. Interesting as it is, the *completeness* of this isolation from England was a misfortune, not a strength, in his poetry.

There is another thing to say in this connection. The expansion of the interests of the English poets beyond England was due in Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and partly in Byron, to the great tidal-wave of feeling for man as man, which, rising long before the French Revolution, was lifted into twice its height and dashed on the shore of the world with overwhelming volume, by

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the earthquake in France of 1789. Special national sentiments were drowned in its waters. Patriotism was the duty of man, not to any one nation but to the whole of humanity, conceived of as the only nation.

In 1832 there was little left of that influence in England among the educated classes, and Tennyson's insular patriotism represented their feeling for many years, and partly represents it now. But the ideas of the Revolution were at the same time taking a wiser and more practical form among the English democracy than they even had at their first outburst in France, and this emerged, on one side of it, in the idea of internationalism. It grew among the propertied classes from the greater facilities of travel, from the wide extension of commercial, and especially of literary, intercommunication. Literature, even more than commerce, diminishes the oppositions and increases the amalgamation of nations. On her lofty plane nations breathe an air in which their quarrels die. The same idea grew up of itself among the working classes, not only in England, but in Germany, Italy, France, America. They began, and have continued, to lose their old belief in distinct warring nationalities. To denationalise the nations into one nation only—the nation of mankind—is too vast an idea to grow quickly, but in all classes, and perhaps most in the working class, there are an increasing number of thinking men who say to the varied nations, "We are all one; our interests, duties, rights, nature, and aims are one."

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And, for my part, I believe that in the full development of that conception the progress of mankind is most deeply concerned, and will be best secured.

Now, when all these classes in England, brought to much the same point by different paths, seek for a poetry which is international rather than national, and which recognises no special country as its own, they do not find it in Tennyson, but they do find Browning writing, and quite naturally, as if he belonged to other peoples as much as to his own, even more than to his own. And they also find that he had been doing this for many years before their own international interests had been awakened. That, then, differentiates him completely from Tennyson, and is another reason why he was not read in the past but is read in the present.

9. Again, with regard to politics and social questions, Tennyson made us know what his general politics were, and he has always pleased or displeased men by his political position. The British Constitution appears throughout his work seated like Zeus on Olympus, with all the world awaiting its nod. Then, also, social problems raise their storm-awakening heads in his poetry: the Woman's Question; War; Competition; the State of the Poor; Education; a State without Religion; the Marriage Question; where Freedom lies; and others. These are brought by Tennyson, though tentatively, into the palace of poetry and given rooms in it.

At both these points Browning differed from

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Tennyson. He was not the politician, not the sociologist, only the poet. No trace of the British Constitution is to be found in his poetry ; no one could tell from it that he had any social views or politics at all. Sixty years in close contact with this country and its movements, and not a line about them !

He records the politics of the place and people of whom or of which he is for the moment writing, but he takes no side. We know what they thought at Rome or among the Druses of these matters, but we do not know what Browning thought. The art-representation, the *Vorstellung* of the thing, is all ; the personal view of the poet is nothing. It is the same in social matters. What he says as a poet concerning the ideas which should rule the temper of the soul and human life in relation to our fellow men may be applied to our social questions, and usefully ; but Browning is not on that plane. There are no poems directly applied to them. This means that he kept himself outside the realm of political and social discussions and in the realm of those high emotions and ideas out of which imagination in lonely creation draws her work to light. With steady purpose he refused to make his poetry the servant of the transient, of the changing elements of the world. He avoided the contemporary. For this high reserve we and the future of art will owe him gratitude.

On the contrast between the theology we find in Tennyson and Browning, and on the contrast between their ethical positions, it will be wiser

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not to speak in this introduction. These two contrasts would lead me too far afield, and they have little or nothing to do with poetry. Moreover, Browning's theology and ethics, as they are called, have been discussed at wearying length for the last ten years, and especially by persons who use his poetry to illustrate from it their own systems of theology, philosophy and ethics.

10. I will pass, therefore, to another contrast—the contrast between them as Artists.

A great number of persons who write about the poets think, when they have said the sort of things I have been saying, that they have said either enough, or the most important things. The things are, indeed, useful to say; they enable us to realise the poet and his character, and the elements of which his poetry is made. They place him in a clear relation to his time; they distinguish him from other poets, and, taken all together, they throw light upon his work. But they are not half enough, nor are they the most important. They leave out the essence of the whole matter; they leave out the poetry. They illuminate the surface of his poetry, but they do not penetrate into his interpretation, by means of his special art, and under the influence of high emotion, of the beautiful and sublime Matter of thought, and feeling which arises out of Nature and Human Nature, the two great subjects of song; which Matter the poets represent in a form so noble and so lovely in itself that, when it is received into a heart prepared for it, it kindles in the receiver a love of

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beauty and sublimity similar to that which the poet felt before he formed, and while he formed, his poem. Such a receiver, reading the poem, makes the poem, with an individual difference, in himself. And this is the main thing ; the eternal, not the temporary thing.

Almost all I have already discussed with regard to Tennyson and Browning belongs to the temporary ; and the varying judgments which their public have formed of them, chiefly based on their appeal to the tendencies of the time, do not at all predict what the final judgment on these men as poets is likely to be. That will depend, not on feelings which belong to the temporary elements of the passing day, but on how far the eternal and unchanging elements of art appear in their work. The things which fitted the poetry of Tennyson to the years between 1840 and 1870 have already passed away ; the things which, as I have explained, fitted the poetry of Browning to the tendencies of the years after 1870 will also disappear and are already disappearing. Indeed, the excessive transiency of nearly all the interests of cultivated society during the last ten years is that in the which most deeply impresses any man who sits somewhat apart from them. And, at any rate, none of these merely contemporary elements, which often seem to men the most important, will count a hundred years hence in the estimate of the poetry either of Tennyson or Browning. They will be of historical interest, and no more. Matters in their poetry, now the subjects of warm discus-

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sion among their critics, will be laid aside as materials for judgment ; and justly, for they are of quite impermanent value.

• Whenever, then, we try to judge them as poets, we must do our best to discharge these temporary things, and consider their poetry as it will seem a hundred years hence to men who will think seriously and feel sensitively, even passionately, towards great and noble Matter of imaginative thought and emotion concerning human life and the natural world, and towards lovely creation of such matter into Form. Their judgment will be made apart from the natural prejudices that arise from contemporary movements. They will not be wiser in their judgment of their own poets than we are about ours, but they will be wiser in their judgment of our poets, because, though they will have their own prejudices, they will not have ours. Moreover, the long, growing, and incessantly corrected judgment of those best fitted to feel what is most beautiful in shaping and most enduring in thought and feeling penetrated and made infinite by imagination, will, by that time, have separated the permanent from the impermanent in the work of Browning and Tennyson.

That judgment will partly depend on the answers, slowly, as it were unconsciously, given by the world to two questions. First, how far does their poetry represent truly and passionately what is natural and most widely felt in loving human nature, whether terrible or joyful, simple or complex, tragic or humorous ? Secondly, how far is

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the representation beautiful and noble in form, and true to the laws of their art. That poetry which is nearest to the most natural, the most universal elements of human life when they are suffused with love—in some at least of its various moods—and at the same time the most beautiful in form, is the best. It wins most affection from mankind, for it is about noble matters of thought which the greater number of men and women desire to contemplate, and about noble matters of passion which the greater number love and therefore enjoy. This poetry lasts from generation to generation, is independent of differences made by climate, by caste, by nationality, by religion, by politics, by knowledge, custom, tradition or morals. These universal, natural elements of human nature are, in all their infinite variety and striving, beloved by men, of undying interest in action, and of immortal pleasure in thought. The nearer a poet is to them, especially to what is lovable, and therefore beautiful in them, the greater and the more enduring is his work. It follows that this greater work will also be simple, that is, easy to feel with the heart though it may be difficult to grasp by the intelligence. Were it not simple in feeling, the general answer of mankind to the call of love, in all its forms, for sympathy, would be unheard. And if it be simple in feeling, it does not much matter if the deep waters of its thought are difficult for the understanding to fathom.

It would be ridiculous to dogmatise on a matter which can only be fully answered a century hence,

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but this much is plain. Of these two poets, taking into consideration the whole of their work, Tennyson is the closest to human nature in its noble, common and loving forms, as Browning is the closest to what is complex, subtle and uncommon in human nature. The representation both of the simple and of the complex is a good thing, and both poets have their place and honour. But the representation of the complex is plainly the more limited in range of influence, and appeals to a special class of minds rather than to mankind at large. There are some, indeed, who think that the appeal to the few, to thinkers alone or high-wrought specialists in various forms of culture, marks out the greater poet. It is the tendency of literary castes to think that specialised work is the greatest. "This man," they say, "is our poet, not the mob's. He stands apart, and his apartness makes his greatness." These are amusing persons, who practically say, "We alone understand him, therefore he is great."

Yet a phrase like "apartness makes greatness," when justly applied to a poet, marks, not his superiority of rank, but his inferiority. It relegates him at once to a lower place. The greatest poets are loved by all, and understood by all who think and feel naturally. Homer was loved by Pericles and by the sausage-seller. Vergil was read with joy by Mæcenas and Augustus, and by the vine-dressers of Mantua. Dante drew after him the greatest minds in Italy, and yet is sung to-day by the shepherds and peasants of the hill-villages of

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Tuscany. Shakespeare pleases the most selected spirits of the world and the galleries of the strolling theatres.

And though Tennyson and Browning are far below these mightier poets, yet when we apply to them this rule, drawn from what we know to be true of the greatest, Tennyson answers its demand more closely than Browning. The highest work which poetry can do is to glorify what is most natural and simple in the whole of loving human nature, and to show the excelling beauty, not so much of the stranger and wilder doings of the natural world, but of its everyday doings and their common changes. In doing these two things with simplicity, passion and beauty is the finest work of the arts, the eternal youth, the illimitable material of poetry, and it will endure while humanity endures in this world, and in that which is to come. Among all our cultivated love of the uncommon, the remote, the subtle, the involved, the metaphysical and the terrible—the representation of which things has its due place, even its necessity—it is well to think of that quiet truth, and to keep it as a first principle in the judgment of the arts. Indeed, the recovery of the natural, simple and universal ways of acting and feeling, in men and women who love, as the finest subjects of the arts has always regenerated them whenever, in pursuit of the unnatural, the complicated, the analytic, and the sensational, they have fallen into decay.

Browning did not like this view, being conscious

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that his poetry did not answer its demand. Not only in early but also in later poems, he pictured his critics stating it, and his picture is scornful enough. There is an entertaining sketch of Naddo, the Philistine critic, in the second book of *Sordello*; and the view I speak of is expressed by him among a huddle of criticisms—

- “ Would you have your songs endure ?
• Build on the human heart !—why to be sure
Yours is one sort of heart.—But I mean theirs,
Ours, every one’s, the healthy heart one cares
To build on ! Central peace, mother of strength,
That’s father of . . . ”

This is good fooling, and Naddo is an ass. Nevertheless, though Naddo makes nonsense of the truth, he was right in the main, and Browning as well as *Sordello* suffered when they forgot or ignored that truth. And, of course, Browning did not forget or ignore it in more than half his work. Even in *Sordello* he tells us how he gave himself up to recording with pity and love the doings of the universal soul. He strove to paint the whole. It was a bold ambition. Few have fulfilled it so well. •None, since Shakespeare, have had a wider range. His portraiture of life was so much more varied than that of Tennyson, so much more extensive and detailed, that on this side he excels Tennyson; but such portraiture is not necessarily poetic, and when it is fond of the complex, it is always in danger of tending to prose. And Browning, picturing human life, deviated too much into the delineation of its more obscure and complex forms. It was in his nature to do and to

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this kind of work ; and, indeed, it has to be done if human life is to be painted fully. Only, it is not to be done too much, if one desires to be always the poet. For the representation of the complex and obscure is chiefly done by the analysing understanding, and its work and pleasure in it lures the poet away from art. He loses the poetic turn of the thing of which he writes, and what he produces is not better than rhythmical prose. Again and again Browning fell into that misfortune ; and it is a strange problem how a man, who was in one part of his nature a great poet, could, under the sway of another, cease to be a poet. At this point his inferiority to Tennyson as a poet is plain. Tennyson rarely wrote a line which was not unmistakably poetry, while Browning could write pages which were unmistakably not poetry.

I do not mean, in saying all this, that Browning did not appeal to that which is deepest and universal in nature and human nature, but only that he did not appeal to it as much as Tennyson. Browning is often simple, lovely and universal. And when he speaks out of that emotional imagination wherein is the hiding of a poet's power, and which is the legitimate sovereign of his intellectual work, he will win and keep the delight and love of the centuries to come. By work of this type he will be finally judged and finally endure ; and, even now, every one who loves great poetry knows what these master-poems are. As to the others, the merely subtle, analytic poems in which intellect, not imagination, is supreme, especially those into

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which he drifted in his later life when the ardour of his poetic youth glowed less warmly—they will always appeal to a certain class of persons who would like to persuade themselves that they like poetry but to whom its book is sealed ; and who, in finding out what Browning means, imagine to their great surprise, that they find out that they care for poetry. What they really care for is their own cleverness in discovering riddles, and they are as far away from poetry as Sirius is from the Sun.

There are, however, many true lovers of poetry who are enthusiastic about these poems. And part of them deserve this enthusiasm, for they have been conceived and made in a wild borderland between analysis and imagination. They occupy a place apart, a backwater in the noble stream of English poetry, filled with strange plants ; and the final judgment of Browning's rank as an artist will not depend on them but on the earlier poems, which, being more "simple, sensuous and passionate," are nearer to the common love and life of man. When, then, we apply this test, the difference of rank between him and Tennyson is not great, but it is plain. Yet, comparison on this point, is difficult. Both drew mankind. Tennyson is closer to that which is most universal in the human heart, Browning to the vast variety within it ; and men in the future will find their poetic wants best satisfied by reading the work of both these poets. Let us say then that in this matter they are equal. Each has done a different part

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of that portraiture of human nature which is the chief work of a poet.

But this is not the only test we may apply to these men as poets. The second question which tries the endurance and greatness of poetic work is this : " How far is any poet's representation of what is true and loving in itself lovely ? " Their stuff may be equally good. Is their form equally good ? Is it as beautiful as an artist, whose first duty is to be true to beauty as the shape of love and truth, ought to make it ? The judgment of the future will also be formed on that ground, and inevitably.

What we call form in poetry may be said to consist of, or to depend on, three things : (1) on a noble style ; (2) on a harmonious composition, varied but at unity ; (3) on a clear, sweet melody of lawful movement in verse. These are not everything in poetry, but they are the half of its whole. The other half is that the " matter "—that is, the deep substance of amalgamated thought and emotion—should be great, vital and fair. But both halves are necessary, and when the half which regards form is weak or unbeautiful, the judgment of the future drops the poems which are faulty in form out of memory, just as it drops out of its affections poems which are excellent in form, but of ignoble, unimpassioned, feeble or thoughtless matter. There was, for example, a whole set of poets towards the end of the Elizabethan period who were close and weighty thinkers, whose poetry is full of intellectual surprises and difficulties, who

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were capable of subtlety of expression and even of lovely turns and phantasies of feeling; whom students read to-day, but whom the poetical world does not read at all. And the reason is that their style, their melody, and their composition do not match in excellence their matter. Their stuff is good, their form is bad. The judgment of the future gives them no high rank. They do not answer well to the test of which I speak.

I do not mean to apply that analogy altogether, only partly, to Browning. He rises far above these poets in style, composition and melody, but he skirts their faults. And if we are asked to compare him to Tennyson, he is inferior to Tennyson at all these points of Form.

(1) His composition was rarely sufficiently careful. It was broken up, overcrowded; minor objects of thought or feeling are made too remarkable for the whole; there is far too little of poetical perspective; the variety of the poem does not always grow out of the subject itself, but out of the external play of Browning's mind upon things remotely connected with the subject; too many side-issues are introduced; everything he imagined is cast upon the canvas, too little is laid aside, so that the poems run to a length which weakens instead of strengthening the main impression. A number of the poems have, that is, the faults of a composer whose fancy runs away with him, who does not ride it as a master; and in whom therefore, for a time, imagination has gone

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to sleep. Moreover, only too often, they have those faults of composition which naturally belong to a poet when he writes as if intellect rather than passion were the ultimate umpire of the work of his art. Of course, there are many exceptions; and the study of those exceptions, as exceptions, would make an interesting essay. On the other hand, Tennyson's composition was for the most part excellent, and always careful.

(2) Then as to style. Browning had a style of his own, wholly devoid of imitation, perfectly individual, and thus is one of the marks of a good artist. It was the outcome of his poetic character, and represented it. At this point his style is more interesting than Tennyson's. Tennyson's style was often too much worked, too consciously subjected to the rules of his art, too worn down to smoothness of texture. Moreover, the natural surprises of an unchartered individuality do not sufficiently appear in it (Tennyson repressed the fantastic), though the whole weight of his character does magnificently appear. But if Tennyson was too conscious of his style—a great misfortune especially in passionate song—Browning did not take any deliberate pains with his style, and that is a greater misfortune. His freedom ran into undue licence; and he seems to be over-conscious, even proud, of his fantastical way of writing. His individuality runs riot in his style. He paid little attention to the well-established rules of his art, in a revulsion, perhaps, from any imitation of the great models. He had not enough reverence for his art, and little for the

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public. He flung his diction at our heads and said :
" This is myself ; take it or leave it."

. None of the greater artists of the world have ever done this. They have not cared for what the world said, but they have cared for their art. There are certain limits to individual capriciousness in style, long since laid down, as it were, by Beauty herself ; which, transgressed, lessen, injure or lose beauty ;
• and Browning continually transgressed those limits.

Again, clearness is one of the first elements in style, and on poetry attaining clearness, depends, in great measure, its enduringness in the future. So far as clearness carries him, Tennyson's poetry is sure to last. So far as Browning's obscurity goes, his poetry will not last like Tennyson's. It is all very well for his students to say that he is not obscure ; he is. Nor is it by any exceptional depth of thought or by any specially profound analysis of the soul that Browning is obscure. It is by his style. By that he makes what is easy difficult. The reader does not get at what he means as he gets at what Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare mean. Dante and Shakespeare are often difficult through the depth and difficulty of their matter ; they are not difficult, except Shakespeare when he was learning his art, by obscurity or carelessness of style. But Browning is difficult, not by his thoughts, but by his expression of them. A poet has no right to be so indifferent, so careless of clearness in his art, I might almost say, so lazy. Browning is negligent to a fault, almost to impertinence. The great poets put the right words in the

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right places, and Tennyson is with them in that. Browning continually puts his words into the wrong places. He leaves out words necessary for the easy understanding of the passage, and for no reason except his fancy. He leaves his sentences half-finished and his meaning half-expressed. He begins a sentence, and having begun it, three or four thoughts connected with it slide into his mind, and instead of putting them aside or using them in another place, he jerks them into the middle of his sentence in a series of parentheses, and then inserts the end of the original sentence, or does not insert it at all. This is irritating except to folk who like discovery of the twisted rather than poetry; and it is quite needless. It is worse than needless, for it lowers the charm and the dignity of the poetry.

Yet, there is something to say on the other side. It is said, and with a certain justice, that "the style is the man. Strip his style away, and where is the man? Where is the real Browning if we get him to change a way of writing in which he naturally shaped his thought?" Well, no one would ask him to impose on himself a style which did not fit his nature. That would be fatal. When he has sometimes tried to do so, as in a few of the dramas, we scarcely recognise our poet, and we lose half of his intellectual and poetic charm. Just as Carlyle when he wrote away from his natural style, as in the life of Sterling and Schiller, is not the great writer he is elsewhere, so was it with Browning. Were we savage satirists, blinded by

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our savagery, we might then say both of Browning and Carlyle that half their power lay in their fantastic, rocky style. We should be quite wrong. Their style was the exact clothing of their thought. They wrote exactly as they thought; and when they put their thought into other clothing, when they doctored their style, they did not represent what they really thought. No sensible person then would have asked Browning to change his style, but would have asked him not to exaggerate it into its defects. It is plain he could have kept it within bounds. He has done so frequently. But as frequently he has allowed it to leap about as wildly as a young colt. He should have submitted it to the *manège*, and ridden it then where he pleased. A very little trouble on his part, a very little sacrifice of his unbridled fancifulness, would have spared us a great deal of unnecessary trouble, and made his poetry better and more enduring.

Another excuse may be made for his faults of style. It may be said that in one sense the faults are excellences. When a poet has to represent excessively subtle phases of thought and feeling, with a crowd of side-thoughts and side-feelings intruding on them; when he has to describe the excessive oddities, the curious turns of human emotion in strange inward conditions or outward circumstances or when he has to deal with rugged or even savage characters under the sway of the passions; he cannot, we are told, do it otherwise than Browning did it, and, instead of being lazy, he used these quips and cranks of style deliberately.

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The excuse has something in it. But, all the same, an artist should have managed it otherwise. Shakespeare was far more subtle in thought than Browning, and he had to deal with every kind of strange circumstance and characters ; but his composition and his style illuminate the characters, order the circumstances, and render clear, as, for example, in the Sonnets, the subtleties of his thought. A great artist, by his comprehensive grasp of the main issue of his work, even in a short lyric or a small picture, and by his luminous representation of it, suggests, without direct expression of them, all the strange psychology and the play of character in the situations. And such an artist does this excellent thing by his noble composition, and by his lofty, clear, and melodious style. The excuse is, then, of some weight, but it does not relieve Browning of the charge. Had he been a greater artist, he would have been a greater master of the right way of saying things and a greater pleasurer of the future. Had he taken more pains with his style, but without losing its individual elements, he might have had as high a poetic place as Tennyson in the judgment of posterity.

(3) In one thing more—in this matter of form—the beauty of poetry lies. It is in sweetness of melody and its charm ; in exquisite fitness of its music to its thought and its emotion ; in lawful change of harmony making enchanting variety to the ear ; in the obedience of the melodies to the laws of the different kinds of poetry ; and in

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the lovely conduct of the harmonies, through all their changes, to that finished close which throws back its own beauty on all that has preceded it. This part of the loveliness of form in poetry, along with composition and style—for without these and without noble matter of thought poetry is nothing but pleasant noise—secures also the continuous delight of men and the approving judgment of the future ; and in this also Tennyson, who gave to it the steady work of a lifetime, stands above his brother-poet. Browning was far too careless of his melody. He frequently sacrificed it, and needlessly, to his thought. He may have imagined that he strengthened the thing he thought by breaking the melody. He did not, he injured it. He injured the melody also by casting into the middle of it, like stones into a clear water, rough parenthetical sounds to suit his parenthetical phrases. He breaks it sometimes asunder with violent clanging words, with discords which he does not resolve, but forgets. And in the pleasure he took in quaint oddities of sound, in jarring tricks with his metre, in fantastic and difficult arrangements of rhyme, in scientific displays of double rhymes, he, only too often, immolates melody on the altar of his own cleverness.

A great many of the poems in which the natural loveliness of melody is thus sacrificed or maimed will last, on account of the closely-woven work of the intellect in them, and on account of their vivid presentation of the travail of the soul ; that is, they will last for qualities which might belong to prose ;

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but they will not last as poetry. And other poems, in which the melody is only interrupted here and there, will lose a great deal of the continuity of pleasure they would have given to man had they been more careful to obey those laws of fine melody which Tennyson never disobeys.

It is fortunate that neither of these injuries can be attributed to the whole of his work ; and I am equally far from saying that his faults of style and composition belong to all his poetry.

There are a number of poems the melody of which is beautiful, in which, if there are discords, they are resolved into a happy concord at their close. There are others the melody of which is so strange, brilliant, and capturing that their sound is never forgotten. There are others the subtle, minor harmonies of which belong to and represent remote pathetic phases of human passion, and they, too, are heard by us in lonely hours of pitiful feeling, and enchant the ear and heart. And these will endure for the noble pleasure of man.

There are also poems the style of which is fitted most happily to the subject, like the *Letter of Karshish to his Friend*, in which Browning has been so seized by his subject, and yet has so mastered it, that he has forgotten to intercalate his own fancies ; and in which, if the style is broken, it is broken in full harmony with the situation, and in obedience to the unity of impression he desired to make. There are others, like *Abt Vogler*, in which the style is extraordinarily noble, clear, and uplifted ; and there are long passages in the more important

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poems, like *Paracelsus*, where the joy and glory of the thought and passion of Browning inform the verse with dignity, and make its march stately with solemn and beautiful music. Where the style and melody are thus fine the composition is also good. The parts, in their variety, belong to one another and to the unity of the whole. Style, melody, and composition are always in the closest relation. And this nobleness of composition, style, and melody is chiefly found in these poems of his which have to do with the great matter of poetry—the representation of the universal and simple passions of human nature with their attendant and necessary thoughts. And there, in that part of his work, not in that other part for which he is unduly praised, and which belongs to the over-subtilised and over-intellectual time in which our self-conscious culture now is striving to resist its decay and to prove that its disease is health, is the lasting power of Browning.

And then, beyond all these matters of form, there is the poet himself, alone among his fellows in his unique and individual power, who has fastened himself into our hearts, added a new world to our perceptions, developed our lives and enlarged our interests. And there are the separate and distinguished excellences of his work—the virtues which have no defects, the virtues, too, of his defects, all the new wonders of his realm—the many originalities which have justly earned for him that high and lonely seat on Parnassus where his noble Shadow sits to-day, unchallenged.

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in our time save by that other Shadow with whom,
in reverence and love, we have been perhaps too
bold to contrast him.

CHAPTER II

THE TREATMENT OF NATURE

It is a difficult task to explain or analyse the treatment of Nature by Browning. It is easy enough to point out his remarkable love of her colour, his vivid painting of brief landscapes, his minute observation, his flashing way of description, his feeling for the breadth and freshness of Nature, his love of flowers and animals, and the way he has of hitting and emphasising the central point or light of a landscape. This is easy work, but it is not so easy to capture and define the way in which his soul, when he was alone, felt with regard to the heavens, and the earth and all that therein is. Others, like Wordsworth, have stated this plainly : Browning has nowhere defined his way. What his intellect held the Natural World to be, in itself ; what it meant for man ; the relation in which it stood to God and God to it—these things are partly plain. They have their attraction for us. It is always interesting to know what an imaginative genius thinks about such matters. But it is only a biographical or a half-scientific interest. But what we want to discover is how Browning, as a poet, felt the world of Nature. We have to try and catch the unconscious attitude of his soul when the Universe was at work around

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him, and he was for the time its centre—and this is the real difficulty.

Sometimes we imagine we have caught and fixed this elusive thing, but we finally give up the quest. The best thing we can do is to try to find the two or three general thoughts, the most frequently recurring emotions Browning had when Nature at sundry hours and in diverse manners displayed before him her beauty, splendour and fire, and seemed to ask his worship ; or again, when she stood apart from him, with the mocking smile she often wears, and whispered in his ear, " Thou shalt pursue me always, but never find my secret, never grasp my streaming hair." And both these experiences are to be found in Browning. Nature and he are sometimes at one, and sometimes at two ; but seldom the first, and generally the second.

The natural world Tennyson describes is for the greater part of it a reflection of man, or used to heighten man's feeling, or to illustrate his action, or sentimentalised by memorial associations of humanity, or, finally, invented as a background for a human subject, and with a distinct direction towards that subject. Browning, with a few exceptions, does the exact opposite. His natural world is not made by our thought, nor does it reflect our passions. His illustrations, drawn from it, of our actions, break down at certain points, as if the illustrating material were alien from our nature. Nature, it is true, he thinks, leads up to man, and therefore has elements in her

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which are dim prophecies and prognostics of us ; but she is only connected with us as the road is with the goal it reaches in the end. She exists independently of us, but yet she exists to suggest to us what we may become, to awaken in us dim longings and desires, to surprise us into confession of our inadequacy, to startle us with perceptions of an infinitude we do not possess as yet but may possess ; to make us feel our ignorance, weakness, want of finish ; and by partly exhibiting the variety, knowledge, love, power and finish of God, to urge us forward in humble pursuit to the infinite in him. The day Browning climbs Mont Salève, at the beginning of his poem *La Saisiaz*, after a description of his climb in which he notes a host of minute quaintnesses in rock and flower, and especially little flares of colour, all of them unsentimentalised, he suddenly stands on the mountain-top, and is smitten with the glory of the view. What does he see ? Himself in Nature ? or Nature herself, like a living being ? Not at all. He sees what he thinks Nature is there to teach us—not herself, but what is beyond herself. “ I was stationed,” he cries, deliberately making this point, “ face to face with—Nature ?—rather with Infinitude.” We are not in Nature : a part of God aspiring to the whole is there, but not the all of God. And Nature shows forth her glory, not to keep us with herself, but to send us on to her Source, of whom the universe is but a shred.

The universe of what we call matter in all its forms, which is the definition of Nature as I speak

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of it here, in one form to Browning of the creative joy of God : we are another form of the same joy. Nor does Browning conceive, as Wordsworth conceived, of any pre-established harmony between us and the natural world, so that Humanity and Nature can easily converse and live together ; so that we can express our thoughts and emotions in terms of Nature ; or so that Nature can have as it were, a human soul. This is not Browning's conception. If he had such a conception he would frequently use in his descriptions what Ruskin calls the " pathetic fallacy," the use of which is excessively common in Tennyson. I can scarcely recall more than a very few instances of this in all the poetry of Browning. Even where it seems to occur, where Nature is spoken of in human terms, it does not really occur. Take this passage from *James Lee's Wife* :

Oh, good gigantic smile o' the brown old earth,
This autumn morning ! How he sets his bones
To bask i' the sun, and thrusts out knees and feet
For the ripple to run over in its mirth ;
Listening the while, where on the heap of stones
The white breast of the sea-lark twitters sweet.

The smile, the mirth, the listening, might be said to impute humanity to Nature : but the Earth and the Sea are plainly quite distinct from us. These are great giant creatures who are not ourselves : Titans who live with one another and not with us ; and the terms of our humanity are used to make us aware of their separate existence from us, not of their being images only of our mind.

Another passage will illustrate the same habit

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of Browning's mind with Nature. He describes, for the purposes of his general thought, in *Fifine at the Fair*, the course of a stormy sunset. The clouds, the sun, the night, act like men, and are written of in terms of humanity. But this is only to explain matters to us; the mighty creatures themselves have nothing to do with us. They live their own vast, indifferent life; and we see, like spectators, what they are doing, and do not understand what we see. The sunset seems to him the last act of an ever-recurring drama, in which the clouds barricade the Sun against his rest, and he plays with their opposition like the huge giant he is; till Night, with her terrific mace, angry with them for preventing the Sun from repose, repose which will make her Queen of the world, beats them into ruin. This is the passage:

For as on edifice of cloud i' the grey and green
Of evening,—built about some glory of the west,
To barricade the sun's departure,—manifest,
He plays, pre-eminently gold, gilds vapour, crag and
crest

Which bend in rapt suspense above the act and deed
They cluster round and keep their very own, nor heed
The world at watch; while we, breathlessly at the base
O' the castellated bulk, note momentarily the mace
Of night fall here, fall there, bring chance with every
blow,

Alike to sharpened shaft and broadened portico
I' the structure; heights and depths, beneath the leaden
stress

Crumble and melt and mix together, coalesce,
Reform, but sadder still, subdued yet more and more
By every fresh defeat, till wearied eyes need pore
No longer on the dull impoverished decadence
Of all that pomp of pile in towering evidence
So lately.

Fifine, cvi.

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It is plain that Browning separates us altogether from the elemental life of these gigantic beings. And what is true of these passages is true, with one or two exceptions, of all the natural descriptions of Browning in which the pathetic fallacy seems to be used by him. I need not say how extraordinarily apart this method of his is from that of Tennyson.

Then Tennyson, like Coleridge—only Tennyson is as vague and as wavering in this belief as Coleridge is firm and clear in it—sometimes speaks as if Nature did not exist at all apart from our thought :

Her life the eddying of our living soul--

a possible, even a probable explanation. But it is not Browning's view. There is a celebrated passage in *Paracelsus* which is quite inconsistent with it. All Nature, from the beginning, is made to issue forth from the joy God has in making, in embodying his thought in form ; and when one form has been made and rejoiced in, in making another still more lovely on the foundation of the last. So, joy after joy, the world was built, till, in the life of all he has made, God sees his ancient rapture of movement and power, and feels his delight renewed. I will not quote it here, but only mark that we and the " eddying of our living soul " have nothing to do with the making of this Nature. It is not even the thoughts of God in us. God and Nature are alone, and were alone together countless years before we were born. But man was the close of all. Nature was built up, through every

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stage, that man might know himself to be its close—its seal—but not it. It is a separate, unhuman form of God. Existing thus apart, it does a certain work on us, impressing us from without. The God in it speaks to the God in us. It may sometimes be said to be interested in us, but not like a man in a man. He even goes so far as to impute to Nature, but rarely, such an interest in us; but in reality he rather thinks that we, being Nature's end, have at such times touched for a moment some of those elements in her which have come down to us—elements apart from the soul. And Browning takes care, even when he represents Nature as suddenly at one with us, to keep up the separateness. The interest spoken of is not a human interest, nor resembles it. It is like the interest Ariel takes in Prospero and Miranda—an elemental interest, that of a creature whose nature knows its radical difference from human nature. If Nature sees us in sorrow or in joy, she knows, in these few passages of Browning's poetry, or seems to know, that we mourn or rejoice, and if she could feel with us she would; but she cannot quite do so. Like Ariel, she would be grieved with the grief of Gonzalo, were her affections human. She has then a wild, unhuman, unmoral, unspiritual interest in us, like a being who has an elemental life, but no soul. But sometimes she is made to go farther, and has the same kind of interest in us which Oberon has in the loves of Helena and Hermia. When we are loving, and on the verge of such untroubled joy as Nature

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has always 'in her being, then she seems able, in Browning's poetry, actually to work for us, and help us into the fulness of our joy. In his poem, *By the Fireside*, he tells how he and the woman he loved were brought to know their love. It is a passage full of his peculiar view of Nature. The place where the two lovers stay their footsteps on the hill knows all about them. "It is silent and aware." But it is apart from them also :

It has had its scenes, its joys and crimes,
But that is its own affair.

And its silence also is its own. Those who linger there think that the place longs to speak ; its bosom seems to heave with all it knows ; but the desire is its own, not ours transferred to it. But when the two lovers were there, Nature, of her own accord, made up a spell for them and troubled them into speech :

A moment after, and hands unseen
Were hanging the night around us fast ;
But we knew that a bar was broken between
Life and life : we were mixed at last
In spite of the mortal screen.

The forests had done it ; there they stood ;
We caught for a moment the powers at play :
They had mingled us so, for once and good,
Their work was done—we might go or stay,
They relapsed to their ancient mood.

Not one of the poets of this century would have thought in that fashion concerning Nature. Man, only for a second, happened to be in harmony with the Powers at play in Nature. They took the two

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"lovers up for a moment, made them one, and dropped them. "They relapsed to their ancient mood." The line is a whole lesson in Browning's view of Nature. But this special interest in us is rare, for we are seldom in the blessed mood of unself-conscious joy and love. When we are, on the other hand, self-conscious, or in doubt, or out of harmony with love and joy, or anxious for the transient things of the world—Nature, unsympathetic, wholly mocks and plays with us like a faun. When Sordello climbs the ravine, thinking of himself as Apollo, the wood, "proud of its observer," a mocking phrase, "tried surprises on him, stratagems and games."

Or, our life is too small for her greatness. When we are unworthy of our high lineage, noisy or mean, then we

|| quail before a quiet sky
|| Or sea, too little for their quietude.

That is a phrase which might fall in with Wordsworth's theory of Nature, but this which follows from *The Englishman in Italy*, is only Browning's. The man has climbed to the top of Calvano,

And God's own profound
Was above me, and round me the mountains,
And under, the sea,
And within me, my heart to bear witness
What was and shall be.

He is worthy of the glorious sight ; full of eternal thoughts. Wordsworth would then have made the soul of Nature sympathise with his soul. But Browning makes Nature manifest her apartness

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from the mⁿ. The mountains know nothing of his soul : they amuse themselves with him ; they are even half angry with him for his intrusion — a foreigner who dares an entrance into their un-
trespassed world. Tennyson could not have thought that way. It is true the mountains are alive in the poet's thought, but not with the poet's life : nor does he touch them with his sentiment.

Oh, those mountains, their infinite movement
Still moving with you ;
For, ever some new head and heart of them
Thrusts into view
To observe the intruder ; you see it
If quickly you turn
And, before they escape you surprise them.
They grudge you should learn
How the soft plains they look on, lean over
And love (they pretend) —
Cower beneath them.

Total apartness from us ! Nature mocking, surprising us ; watching us from a distance, even pleased to see us going to our destruction. We may remember how the hills look grimly on Childe Roland when he comes to the tower. The very sunset comes back to see him die :

before it left,
The dying sunset kindled through a cleft :
The hills, like giants at a hunting, lay,
Chin upon hand, to see the game at bay.—

Then, as if they loved to see the death of their quarry, cried, without one touch of sympathy :

“ Now stab and end the creature—to the left ! ”

And once, so divided from our life is her life, she

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pities her own case and refuses our pity. Man cannot help her. The starved, ignoble country in *Childe Roland*, one of the finest pieces of description in Browning, wicked, waste and leprous land, makes Nature herself sick with peevish wrath. "I cannot help my case," she cries. "Nothing but the Judgment's fire can cure the place."

On the whole, then, for these instances might be supported by many more, Nature is alive in Browning, but she is not humanised at all, nor at all at one with us. Tennyson does not make her alive, but he does humanise her. The other poets of the century do make her alive, but they harmonise her in one way or another with us. Browning is distinct from them all in keeping her quite divided from man.

But then he has observed that Nature is expressed in terms of man, and he naturally, for this conflicts with his general view, desires to explain this. He does explain it in a passage in *Paracelsus*. Man once descried, imprints for ever

His presence on all lifeless things ; the winds
Are henceforth voices, wailing or a shout,
A querulous mutter or a quick gay laugh,
Never a senseless gust now man is born.
The herded pines commune and have deep thoughts
A secret they assemble to discuss
When the sun drops behind their trunks which glare
Like grates of hell : the peerless cup afloat
Of the lake-lily is an urn, some nymph
Swims bearing high above her head : no bird
Whistles unseen, but through the gaps above
That let light in upon the gloomy woods,
A shape peeps from the breezy forest-top,
Arch with small puckered mouth and mocking eye.

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The morn has enterprise, deep quiet droops
With evening, triumph takes the sunset hour,
Voluptuous transport ripens with the corn
Beneath a warm moon like a happy face :
—And this to fill us with regard for Man.

He does not say, as the other poets do, that the pines really commune, or that the morn has enterprise, or that nymphs and satyrs live in the woods, but that this *seems* to be, because man, as the crown of the natural world, throws back his soul and his soul's life on all the grades of inferior life which preceded him. It is Browning's contradiction of any one who thinks that the pathetic fallacy exists in his poetry.

Nature has then a life of her own, her own joys and sorrows, or rather, only joy. Browning, indeed, with his intensity of imagination and his ineradicable desire of life, was not the man to conceive Nature as dead, as having no conscious being of any kind. He did not impute a personality like ours to Nature, but he saw joy and rapture and play, even love, moving in everything ; and sometimes he added to this delight she has in herself—and just because the creature was not human—a touch of elemental unmoral malice, a tricksome sportiveness like that of Puck in *Midsummer Night's Dream*. The life, then, of Nature had no relation of its own to our life ; but we had some relation to it because we were conscious that we were its close and its completion.

It follows from this idea of Browning's that he was capable of describing Nature as she is, without adding any deceiving mist of human sentiment to

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his descriptions ; and of describing her as accurately and as vividly as Tennyson, even more vividly, because of his extraordinary eye for colour. And Nature, so described, is of great interest in Browning's poetry.

But, then, in any description of Nature, we desire the entrance into such description of some human feeling so that it may be a more complete theme for poetry. Browning does this in a different way from Tennyson, who gives human feelings and thoughts to Nature, or steepes it in human memories. Browning catches Nature up into himself, and the human element is not in Nature but in him, in what *he* thinks and feels, in all that Nature, quite apart from him, awakens in him. Sometimes he even goes so far as to toss Nature aside altogether, as unworthy to be thought of in comparison with humanity. That joy in Nature herself, for her own sake, which was so distinguishing a mark of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Byron and Keats, is rarely, if ever, found in Browning. This places him apart. What he loved was man ; and save at those times of which I have spoken, when he conceives Nature as the life and play and wrath and fancy of huge elemental powers like gods and goddesses, he uses her as a background only for human life. She is of little importance unless man be present, and then she is no more than the scenery in a drama. Take the first two verses of *A Lovers' Quarrel*,

Oh, what a dawn of day !
How the March sun feels like May !

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All is blue again
After last night's rain,
And the South dries the hawthorn-spray.

That is well done—he has liked what he saw.
But what is it all, he thinks ; what do I care
about it ? And he ends the verse :

Only, my Love's away !
I'd as lief that the blue were grey.

Then take the next verse :

Runnels, which rillels swell,
Must be dancing down the dell,
With a foaming head
On the beryl bed
Paven smooth as a hermit's cell.

It is excellent description, but it is only scenery for
the real passion in Browning's mind.

Each with a tale to tell —
Could my Love but attend as well.

By the Fireside illustrates the same point. No
description can be better, more close, more ob-
served, than of the whole walk over the hill ; but
it is mere scenery for the lovers. The real passion
lies in their hearts.

We have then direct description of Nature ;
direct description of man sometimes as influenced
by Nature ; sometimes Nature used as the scenery
of human passion ; but no intermingling of them
both. Each is for ever distinct. The only thing
that unites them in idea, and in the end, is that
both have proceeded from the creative joy of God.
Of course this way of thinking permits of the
things of Nature being used to illustrate the doings,

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thinkings and character of man ; and in none of his poems is such illustration better used than in *Sordello*. There is a famous passage, in itself a noble description of the opulent generativeness of a warm land like Italy, in which he compares the rich, poetic soul of Sordello to such a land, and the lovely line in it,

And still more labyrinthine buds the rose,

holds in its symbolism the whole essence of a great artist's nature. I quote the passage. It describes Sordello, and it could not better describe Italy :

Sordello foremost in the regal class
Nature has broadly severed from the mass
Of men, and framed for pleasure, as she frames
Some happy lands, that have luxuriant names
For loose fertility ; a foothill there
Suffices to upturn to the warm air
Half-germinating spices, more decay
Produces richer life, and day by day
New pollen on the hlv-petal grows,
And still more labyrinthine buds the rose.

That compares to the character of a whole country the character of a whole type of humanity. I take another of such comparisons, and it is as minute as this is broad, and done with as great skill and charm. Sordello is full of poetic fancies, touched and glimmering with the dew of youth, and he has woven them around the old castle where he lives. Browning compares the young man's imaginative play to the airy and audacious labour of the spider. He, that is, Sordello,

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O'er-festooning every interval,
As the adventurous spider, making light
Of distance, shoots her threads from depth to height,
From barbarian to battlement : so flung
Fantasies forth and in their centre swung
Our architect,—the breezy morning fresh
Above, and merry, —all his waving mesh
Laughing with lucid dew-drops rainbow-edged.

It could not be better done. The description might stand alone, but better than it is the image it gives of the joy, fancifulness and creativeness of a young poet, making his web of thoughts and imagination, swinging in their centre like the spider ; all of them subtle as the spider's threads, obeying every passing wind of impulse, and gemmed with the dew and sunlight of youth.

Again, in *A Bean-stripe : also Apple-Eating*, Ferishtah is asked—Is life a good or bad thing, white or black ? " Good," says Ferishtah, " if one keeps moving. I only move. When I stop, I may stop in a black place or a white. But everything around me is motionless as regards me, and is nothing more than stuff which tests my power of throwing light and colour on them as I move. It is I who make life good or bad, black or white. I am like the moon going through vapour "—and this is the illustration :

Mark the flying orb
Think'st thou the halo, painted still afresh
At each new cloud-fleece pierced and passaged through
This was and is and will be evermore
Coloured in permanence ? The glory swims
Girdling the glory-giver, swallowed straight
By night's abysmal gloom, unglorified
Behind as erst before the advancer : gloom ?

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Faced by the onward-faring, see, succeed
From the abandoned heaven a next surprise,
And where's the gloom now?—silver-smitten straight,
One glow and variegation! So, with me,
Who move and make,—myself,—the black, the white,
The good, the bad, of life's environment.

Fine as these illustrations are, intimate and minute, they are only a few out of a multitude of those comparisons which in Browning image what is in man from that which is within Nature—hints, prognostics, prophecies, as he would call them, of humanity, but not human.

There is, however, one human passion which Browning conceives as existing in Nature—the passion of joy. But it is a different joy from ours. It is not dashed by any sorrow, and it is very rarely that we are so freed from pain or from self-contemplation as to be able to enter even for a brief hour into the rapture of Nature. That rapture, in Browning's thought, was derived from the creative thought of God exercising itself with delight in the incessant making of Nature. And its manifestation was life, that joyful rush of life in all things into fuller and fuller being. No poet felt this ecstasy of mere living in Nature more deeply than Browning. His own rapture (the word is not too strong) in this life appears again and again in his poetry, and when it does, Browning is not a man sympathising from without with Nature. He is then a part of Nature herself, a living piece of the great organism, having his own rejoicing life in the mightier life, which includes him; and feeling, with the rest, the abounding pleasure of continuous life reaching

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upwards through growth to higher forms of being, swifter powers of living. I might give many examples, but one will suffice, and it is the more important because it belongs not to his ardent youth, but to his mature manhood. It is part of the song of *Thamyris* in *Aristophanes' Apology*. *Thamyris*, going to meet the Muses in rivalry, sings as he walks in the splendid morning the song of the rapture of the life of Earth, and is himself part of the rejoicing movement.

Thamyris, marching laughed " Each flake of foam "
(As sparklingly the apple raced him by)
" Mocks slower clouds adrift in the blue dome ! "

For Autumn was the season, red the sky
Held morn's conclusive signet of the sun
To break the mists up bid them blaze and die.

Morn had the mastery as one by one
All pomps produced themselves along the tract
From earth's far ending to near heaven begun

Was there a ravaged tree ? it laughed compact
With gold a leaf ball crisp high brandished now,
Tempting to onset frost which late attacked.

Was there a wizened shrub a starveling bough,
A fleecy thistle filched from by the wind,
A weed, Pan's trampling hoof would disallow ?

Each, with a glory and a rapture twined
About it, joined the rush of air and light
And forsook the world was of one joyous mind.

Say not the birds flew ! they forbore their right—
Swam, revelling onward in the roll of things
Say not the beasts' mirth bounded ! that was flight—

How could the creatures leap, no lift of wings ?
Such earth's community of purpose, such
The case of earth's fulfilled imaginings,—

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So did the near and far appear to touch
I' the moment's transport,—that an interchange
Of function, far with near, seemed scarce too much,

And had the rooted plant aspired to range
With the snake's licence while the insect yearned
To glow fixed as the flower it were not strange -

No more than if the fluttery tree-top turned
To actual music, sang itself aloft,
Or if the wind, impassioned chantress, earned

The right to soar embodied in some soft
Fine form all fit for cloud companionship,
And, blissful, once touch beauty chased so oft.

Thamuris, marching, let no fancy slip
Born of the fiery transport, lyre and song
Were his, to smite with hand and launch from lip—

The next thing to touch on is his drawing of landscape, not now of separate pieces of Nature, but of the whole view of a land seen under a certain aspect of the heavens. All the poets ought to be able to do this well, and I drew attention to the brief, condensed, yet fan-opening fashion in which Tennyson has done it. Sometimes the poets describe what they see before them, or have seen; drawing directly from Nature. Sometimes they invent a wide or varied landscape as a background for a human subject, and arrange and tune it for that purpose. Shelley did this with greatness and subtlety. Browning does not do it, except, perhaps, in *Christmas-Eve*, when he prepares the night for the appearance of Christ. Nevertheless, even in *Christmas-Eve*, the description of the lunar rainbow is of a thing he has seen, of a not-invented thing, and it is as clear, vivid and

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natural as it can be ; only it is heightened and thrilled through by the expectancy and the thrill in Browning's soul which the reader feels and which the poet, through his emotion, makes the reader comprehend. But there is no suggestion that any of this feeling exists in Nature. The rainbow has no consciousness of the vision to come or of the passion in the poet (as it would have had in Wordsworth), and therefore is painted with an accuracy undimmed by any transference to Nature of the soul of the poet.

I quote the piece ; it is a noble specimen of his landscape work :

But lo, what think you ? suddenly
The rain and the wind ceased, and the sky
Received at once the full fruition
Of the moon's consummate apparition.
The black cloud barricade was riven,
Ruined beneath her feet, and driven
Deep in the West ; while, bare and breathless,
North and South and East lay ready
For a glorious thing that, dauntless, deathless,
Sprang across them and stood steady.

'Twas a moon-rainbow, vast and perfect,
From heaven to heaven extending, perfect
As the mother-moon's self, full in face,
It rose, distinctly at the base
With its severe proper colours chorded
Which still, in the rising, were compressed,
Until at last they coalesced,
And supreme the spectral creature lorded

In a triumph of whitest white,—
Above which intervened the night.
But above night too, like only the next,
The second of a wondrous sequence,
Reaching in rare and rarer frequency,
Till the heaven of heavens were circumflexed,

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Another rainbow rose, a mightier,
Fainter, flushier, and flightier, —
Rapture dying along its verge,
Oh, whose foot shall I see emerge,
Whose, from the straining topmost dark,
On to the key-stone of that arc ?

This is only a piece of sky, though I have called it landscape work. But then the sky is frequently treated alone by Browning ; and is always present in power over his landscapes—it, and the winds in it. This is natural enough for one who lived so much in Italy, where the scenery of the sky is more superb than that of the earth—so various, noble and surprising that when Nature plays there, as a poet, her tragedy and comedy, one scarcely takes the trouble of considering the earth.

However, we find an abundance of true landscapes in Browning. They are, with a few exceptions, Italian ; and they have that grandeur and breadth, that intensity given by blazing colour, that peculiar tint either of labyrinthine or of tragic sentiment which belong to Italy. I select a few of them :

The morn when first it thunders in March
The eel in the pond gives a leap, they say ;
As I leaned and looked over the aloof arch
Of the villa-gate this warm March day,
No flash snapped, no dumb thunder rolled*
In the valley beneath where, white and wide
Washed by the morning water-gold,
Florence lay out on the mountain side
River and bridge and street and square,
Lay mine, as much at my beck and call,
Through the live translucent bath of air,
As the sights in a magic crystal ball.

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Here is the Roman Campagna and its very sentiment :

The champain with it, endless, fleece
Of frathery grasses everywhere !
Silence and passion, joy and peace
An everlasting wash of air—
Rome's ghost since her decease

And this might be in the same place

Where the quiet coloured end of evening smiles,
Miles and miles
On the solitary pastures where our sheep
Half asleep
Tinkle homeward through the twilight—

This is a crimson sunset over dark and distant
woods in autumn .

That autumn eve was stilled
A last remains of sunset dimly burned
O'er the far forests, like a torch flame turned
By the wind back upon its bearer's hand
In one long flare of crimson, as a brand
The woods beneath lay black A single eye
From all Verona cared for the soft sky

And if we desire a sunrise, there is the triumphant
beginning of *Pippa Passes*—a glorious outburst of
light, colour and splendour, impassioned and rushing,
the very upsoaring of Apollo's head behind his
jocund steeds. It begins with one word, like a
single stroke on the gong of Nature : it continues
till the whole of the overarching vault, and the
world below, in vast disclosure, is flooded with an
ocean of gold.

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Day !

Faster and more fast,
O'er night's brim, day boils at last ;
Boils, pure gold, o'er the cloud-cup's brim
Where spurting and suppressed it lay,
For not a froth-flake touched the rim
Of yonder gap in the solid gray
Of the eastern cloud, an hour away ,
But forth one wavelet, then another, curled,
Till the whole sunrise, not to be suppressed,
Rose, reddened, and its seething breast
Flickered in bounds, grew gold, then overflowed the
world

This is chiefly of the sky, but the description in that gipsy-hearted poem, *The Flight of the Duchess*, brings before us, at great length, league after league of wide-spreading landscape. It is, first, of the great wild country, cornfield, vineyards, sheep-ranges, open chase, till we arrive at last at the mountains ; and climbing up among their pines, dip down into a yet vaster and wilder country, a red, drear, burnt-up plain, over which we are carried for miles :

Till at the last, for a bounding belt,
Comes the salt sand hoar of the great sea-shore.

Or we may read the *Grammarian's Funeral*, where we leave the city walls and climb the peak on whose topmost ledge he is to be buried. As we ascend the landscape widens ; we see it expanding in the verse. Moreover, with a wonderful power, Browning makes us feel the air grow keener, fresher, brighter, more soundless and lonelier. That, too, is given by the verse ; it is a triumph in Nature-poetry.

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Nor is he less effective in narrow landscape, in the description of small shut-in spaces of Nature. There is the garden at the beginning of *Paracelsus* ; the ravine, step by step, in *Pauline* ; the sea-beach, and its little cabinet landscapes, in *James Lee's Wife* ; the exquisite pictures of the path over the Col di Colma in *By the Fireside*—for though the whole of the landscape is given, yet each verse almost might stand as a small picture by itself. It is one of Browning's favourite ways of description, to walk slowly through the landscape, describing step by step those parts of it which strike him, and leaving to us to combine the parts into the whole. But *his* way of combination is to touch the last thing he describes with human love, and to throw back this atmosphere of feeling over all the pictures he has made. The verses I quote do this :

Oh moment, one and infinite !
The water slips o'er rock and stone ;
The West is tender, hardly bright :
How grey at once in the evening grown—
One star, its chrysolite !

We two stood there with never a third,
But each by each, as each knew well :
The sights we saw and the sounds we heard,
The lights and the shades made up a spell
Till the trouble grew and stirred.

Oh, the little more, and how much it is !
And the little less, and what worlds away !
How a sound shall quicken content to bliss,
Or a breath suspend the blood's best play,
And life be a proof of this !

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There are many such miniatures of Nature in Browning's poetry. Sometimes, however, the pictures are larger and nobler, when the natural thing described is in itself charged with power, terror or dignity. I give one instance of this, where the fierce Italian thunderstorm is enhanced by being the messenger of God's menace to guilt. It is from *Pippa Passes*. The heaven's pillars are overbowed with heat. The black-blue canopy descends close on Ottima and Sebald.

Buried in woods we lay, you recollect ;
Swift ran the searching tempest overhead ;
And ever and anon some bright white shaft
Burned thro' the pine-tree roof, here burned and there,
As if God's messenger thro' the close wood-screen
Plunged and replunged his weapon at a venture,
Feeling for guilty thee and me ; then broke .
The thunder like a whole sea overhead—

That is as splendid as the thing itself.

Again, no one can help observing in all these quotations the extraordinary love of colour, a love Tennyson has in far fainter measure, but which Browning seems to possess more than any other English poet. Only Sir Walter Scott approaches him in this. Scott, knowing the Highlands, knew dark magnificence of colour. But Browning's love of colour arose from his having lived so long in Italy, where the light is so pure, clear, and brilliant that colour is more intense, and at dawn and sunset more deep, delicate and various than it is in our land. „ Sometimes, as Ruskin says, " it is not colour, it is conflagration " ; but wherever it is, in the bell of a flower, on the edge of a cloud,

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on the back of a lizard, on the veins of a lichen, it strikes in Browning's verse at our eyes, and he only, in English poetry, has joy enough in it to be its full interpreter.

He sees the wild tulip blow out its great red bell ; he sees the thin clear bubble of blood at its tip ; he sees the spike of gold which burns deep in the bluebell's womb ; the corals, that like lamps, disperse thick red flame through the dusk green, universe of the ocean ; the lakes which, when the morn breaks,

Blaze like a wyvern flying round the sun ,

the woodland brake whose withered fern Dawn feeds with gold ; the moon carried off at sunrise in purple fire ; the larch-blossoms crisp and pink ; the sanguine heart of the pomegranate ; the filberts russet-sheathed and velvet-capped ; the poppies crimson to blackness ; the red fans of the butterfly falling on the rock like a drop of fire from a brandished torch ; the star-fish, rose-jacynth to the finger-tips ; and a hundred other passionate seizures of colour. And, for the last of these colour remembrances, in quieter tints—almost in black and white—I quote this lovely verse from *James Lee's Wife* :

The swallow has set her six young on the rail,
And looks seaward :

The water 's in stripes like a snake, olive pale
To the leeward,—

On the weatherside, black, spotted white with the wind.

*" Good fortune departs, and disaster's behind"—

Mark, the wind with its wants and its infinite wail !

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So, not only do we possess all these landscapes but we possess them in colour. They are painted as well as drawn. It is his love of colour which made at least half of the impulse that drove him at times into Impressionism. Good drawing is little to the impressionist painters. It is the sudden glow, splash or flicker of colour that moves them which makes on them the swift, the momentary impression they wish to record.

And colour acted on Browning in the same way. I said he had been impressionist, when he liked, for forty years before Impressionism was born in modern art. He was so, because from the beginning he saw things in colour, more than in light and shade. It is well worth a reader's while to search him for colour-impressions. I take one, for example, with the black horse flung in at the end exactly in the way an artist would do it who loved a flash of black life midst of a dead expanse of gold and green

Fancy the Pampas' sheen !
Miles and miles of gold and green
Where the sunflowers blow
In a solid glow,
And—to break now and then the screen—
Black neck and eyeballs keen,
Up a wild horse leaps between !

Having, then, this extraordinary power of sight, needing no carefulness of observation or study, but capable of catching and holding without trouble all that his eye rested or glanced upon, it is no wonder that sometimes it amused him to put into verse the doings of a whole day the work done in it by

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men of all classes and the natural objects that encompassed them ; not cataloguing them dryly, but shooting through them, like rays of light, either his own fancies and thoughts, or the fancies and thoughts of some typical character whom he invented. This he has done specially in two poems : *The Englishman in Italy*, where the vast shell of the Sorrento plain, its sea and mountains, and all the doings of the peasantry, are detailed with the most intimate delight and truth. The second of these poems is *Up at a Villa—Down in the City*, where a farm of the Casentino with its surroundings is contrasted with the street-life of Florence ; and both are described through the delightful characters whom he invents to see them. These poems are astonishing pieces of intimate, joyful observation of scenery.

Again, there is no poet whose love of animals is greater than Browning's, and none who has so frequently, so carefully, so vividly described them. It is amazing, as we go through his work, to realise the largeness of his range in this matter, from the river-horse to the lizard, from the eagle to the wren, from the loud-singing bee to the filmy insect in the sunshine. I give a few examples. Mortal man could not see a lynx more clearly than Karshish.—

A black lynx snarled and pricked a tufted ear ;
Lust of my blood inflamed his yellow balls.

And the very soul of the Eagle is in this
question—

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Ask the geier-eagle why she stoops at once
Into the vast and unexplored abyss, ³
What full-grown power informs her from the first,
Why she not marvels, strenuously beating
The silent boundless regions of the sky !

He has watched the heavy-winged osprey in its
haunts, fain to fly,

but forced the earth his couch to make
Far inland, till his friend the tempest wake,

on whose fiercer wings he can flap his own into
activity.

In *Caliban upon Setebos*, as would naturally be
the case, animal life is everywhere ; and how close
to truth, how keenly observed it is, how the right
points for description are chosen to make us feel
the beast and bird in a single line ; how full of
colour, how flashed into words which seem like
colours, the descriptions are, any animal-lover may
hear in the few lines I quote :

Yon otter, sleek wet, black, lithe as a leech ;
Yon auk, one fire-eye in a ball of foam,
That floats and feeds ; a certain badger brown
He hath watched hunt with that slant white-wedge eye,
By moonlight.

That is enough to prove his power. And the
animals are seen, not as a cultured person sees
them, but as a savage, with his eyes untroubled by
thoughts, sees them ; for Browning, with his
curious self-transmuting power, has put himself
into the skin of Caliban. Then again, in that
lovely lyric in *Paracelsus*,

Thus the [•]Mayne glideth,
the banks and waves are full of all the bird and

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beast life of a river. Elsewhere, he sees the falcon spread his wings like a banner, the stork clapping his bill in the marsh, the coot dipping his blue breast in the water, the swallow flying to Venice—"that stout sea-farer"—the lark shivering for joy, and a hundred other birds; and lastly, even the great bird of the Imagination, the Phoenix, flying home; and in a splendid verse records the sight:

As the King-bird with ages on his plumes
Travels to die in his ancestral glooms.

Not less wonderful, and more unique in English poetry, is his painting of insects. He describes the hermit-bee, the soft, small, unfrighted thing, lighting on the dead vine-leaf, and twirling and filing all day. He strikes out the grasshopper at a touch—

Chirrup the contumacious grasshopper.

He has a swift vision of the azure damsel-fly flitting in the wood:

Child of the simmering quiet, there to die.

He sees all the insect population of an old green wall; fancies the fancies of the crickets and the flies, and the carousing of the cicada in the trees, and the bee swinging in the chalice of the campanula, and the wasps pricking the papers round the peaches, and the gnats and early moths craving their food from God when dawn awakes them, and the fireflies crawling like lamps through the moss, and the spider sprinkled with mottles on an ash-tree's back, and building his web on the edge of

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tombs. These are but a few things, out of this treasure-house of animal observation and love. It is a love which animates and populates with life his landscapes.-

Many of the points I have attempted here to make are illustrated in *Saul*. In verse v. the sheep are pictured, with all a shepherd's delightful affection, coming back at evening to the folding ; and, with David's poetic imagination, compared to the stars following one another into the meadows of night—

And now one after one seeks his lodging as star follows
star
Into eve and the blue far above us —so blue and so
far !

In verse vi. the quails, and the crickets, and the jerboa at the door of his sand house, are thrilled into quicker life by David's music. In verse ix. the full joy of living in beasts and men is painted in the midst of landscape after landscape, struck out in single lines,—till all nature seems crowded and summing with the⁹ intense life whose rapture Browning loved so well. These fully reveal his poetic communion with animals. Then, there is a fine passage in, verse x. where he describes the loosening of a thick bed of snow from the mountain-side*—an occurrence which also drew the interest

* David could only have seen this on the upper slopes of Hermon. But at the time of the poem, when he is the shepherd-youth he could scarcely have visited the north of Palestine. Indeed, he does not seem all his life long to have been near Hermon. Browning has transferred to David what he himself had seen in Switzerland

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of Shelley in the *Prometheus*—which illustrates what I have said of Browning's conception of the separate life, as of giant Titans, of the vaster things in Nature. The mountain is alive and lives his life with his own grim joy, and wears his snow like a breastplate, and discharges it when it pleases him. It is only David who thinks that the great creature lives to guard us from the tempests. And Hebron, high on its crested hill, lifts itself, out of the morning mist in the same giant fashion,

For I wake in the grey dewy covert, while Hebron
upheaves
The dawn struggling with night on his shoulder, and
Kidron retrieves
Slow the damage of yesterday's sunshine.

Then, at the end of the poem, Browning represents all Nature as full of emotion, as gathered into a fuller life, by David's prophecy of the coming of immortal Love in Christ to man. This sympathy of Nature with humanity is so rare a thought in Browning, and so apart from his view of her, that I think he felt its strangeness here; so that he has taken some pains to make us understand that it is not Nature herself who does this, but David, in his uplifted inspiration, who imputes it to her. If that is not the case, it is at least interesting to find the poet, impassioned by his imagination of the situation, driven beyond his usual view into another land of thought.

There is one more thing to say in closing this chapter. Browning, unlike Tennyson, did not invent his 'landscapes. He drew directly from Nature. The landscapes in *Pauline* and *Sordello*,

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and in the lyrical poems are plainly recollections of what he has seen and noted in his memory, from the sweep of the mountainous or oceanic horizon to the lichen on the rock and the painted shell on the seashore. Even the imaginative landscape of *Childe Roland* is a memory, not an invention. I do not say he would have been incapable of such invented landscapes as we find in *Enone* and the *Lotos-Eaters*, but it was not his way to do this. However, he does it once; but he takes care to show that it is not real landscape he is drawing, but landscape in a picture. In *Gerard de Lairese*, one of the poems in *Parleyings with Certain People*, he sets himself to rival the "Walk" in Lairese's *Art of Painting*, and he invents as a background to mythological or historic scenes, five landscapes, of dawn, morning, and noon, evening and falling night. They may be compared with the walk in *Pauline*, and indeed one of them with its deep pool watched over by the trees recalls his description of a similar pool in *Pauline*—a lasting impression of his youth, for it is again used in *Sordello*. These landscapes are some of his most careful natural description. They begin with the great thunderstorm of dawn in which Prometheus is seen riveted to his rock and the eagle-hound of Zeus beside him. Then the morning is described and the awakening of the earth and Artemis going forth, the huntress-queen and the queen of death; then noon with Lydd and the Satyr—that sad story; then evening charged with the fate of empires; and then the night, and in it a vast

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ghost, the ghost of departing glory and beauty. The descriptions are too long to quote, but far too short to read. I would that Browning had done more of this excellent work, but that these were created when he was an old man proves that the fire of imagination burnt in him to the end. They are full of those keen picture-words in which he smites into expression the central point of a landscape. They realise the glory of light, the force, fierceness, even the quiet of Nature, but they have lost a great deal of the colour of which once he was so lavish. Nevertheless, the whole scheme of colour in these pictures, with their figures, recalls the pictures of Tintoret. They have his *furia*, his black, gold, and sombre purple, his white mist and barred clouds and the thunder-roar in his skies. Nor are Prometheus and Artemis, and Lyda on her heap of skins in the deep woods, unworthy of the daring hand of the great Venetian. They seem to stand forth from his canvas.

The poem closes with a charming lyric, half-sad, half-joyful, in which he hails the spring, and which in itself is full of his heart when it was close to the hopefulness he drew from natural beauty. I quote it to close this chapter

Dance, yellows and whites and reds,
Lead your gay orgy, leaves, stalks, heads
Astir with the wind in the tulip beds
There's sunshine, scarcely a wind at all
Disturbs starved grass and daisies small
On a certain mound by a churchyard wall.
Daisies and grass be my heart's bed-fellows,
On the mound wind spares and sunshine mellow
Dance you, reds and whites and yellows,

CHAPTER III

THE TREATMENT OF NATURE

IN the previous chapter, some of the statements made on Browning as a poet of Nature were not sufficiently illustrated, and there are other elements in his natural description which demand attention. The best way to repair these deficiencies will be to take chronologically the natural descriptions in his poems and to comment upon them, leaving out those on which we have already touched. New points of interest will thus arise, and, moreover, taking his natural description as it occurs from volume to volume, we may be able—within this phase of his poetic nature—to place his poetic development in a clearer light.

I begin, therefore, with *Pauline*. The descriptions of nature in that poem are more deliberate, more for their own sake, than elsewhere in Browning's poetry. The first of them faintly recalls the manner of Shelley in the *Alastor*, and I have no doubt was influenced by him. The two others, and the more finished, have already escaped from Shelley, and are almost pre-Raphaelite, as much so as Keats, in their detail. Yet all the three are original, not imitative. They suggest Shelley and Keats, and no more, and it is only the manner and not the matter of these poets that they suggest. Browning became instantly original in this as in other modes of poetry. It was characteristic of

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him from the beginning to the end of his career, to possess within himself his own methods, to draw out of himself new stuff and new shapings.

From one point of view this was full of treasureable matter for us. It is not often the gods give us so opulent an originality. From another point of view it was unfortunate. If he had begun by imitating a little ; if he had studied the excellences of his predecessors more ; if he had curbed his individuality sufficiently to mark, learn and inwardly digest the noble style of others in natural description, and in all other matters of poetry as well, his work would have been much better than it is ; his original excellences would have found fitter and finer expression ; his faults would have been enfeebled instead of being developed ; his style would have been more concise on one side, less abrupt on another, and we should not have been wrongly disturbed by obscurities of diction and angularities of expression. He would have reached more continuously the splendid level he often attained. This is plentifully illustrated by his work on external nature, but less perhaps than by his work on humanity.

The first natural description he published is in the beginning of *Pauline* :

Thou wilt remember one warm morn when winter
Crept aged from the earth, and spring's first breath
Blew soft from the moist hills ; the blackthorn boughs
So dark in the bare wood, when glistening
In the sunshine were white with coming buds,
Like the bright side of a sorrow, and the banks
Had violets opening from sleep like eyes.

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That is fairly good ; he describes what he has seen ; but it might have been better. We know what he means, but his words do not accurately or imaginatively convey this meaning. The best lines are the first three, but the peculiar note of Shelley sighs so fully in them that they do not represent Browning. What is special in them is his peculiar delight not only in the morning which here he celebrates, but in the spring. It was in his nature, even in old age, to love with passion the beginnings of things ; dawn, morning, spring and youth, and their quick blood ; their changes, impulses, their unpremeditated rush into fresh experiment. Unlike Tennyson, who was old when he was old, Browning was young when he was old. Only once in *Asolando*, in one poem, can we trace that he felt winter in his heart. And the lines in *Pauline* which I now quote, spoken by a young man who had dramatised himself into momentary age, are no ill description of his temper at times when he was really old :

As life wanes, all its care and strife and toil
Seem strangely valueless, while the old trees
Which grew by our youth's home, the waving mass
Of climbing plants heavy with bloom and dew,
The morning swallows with their songs like words,
All these seem clear and only worth our thoughts :
So, aught connected with my early life,
My rude songs or my wild imaginings,
How I look on them—most distinct amid
The fever and the stir of after years !

The next description in *Pauline* is that in which he describes—to illustrate what Shelley was to him

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—the woodland spring which became a mighty river. Shelley, as first conceived by Browning, seemed to him like a sacred spring

Scarce worth a moth's flitting, which long grasses
cross,
And one small tree embowers droopingly—
Joying to see some wandering insect won
To live in its few rushes, or some locust
To pasture on its boughs, or some wild bird
Stoop for its freshness from the trackless air

A piece of careful detail, close to nature, but not close enough ; needing to be more detailed or less detailed, but the first instance in his work of his deliberate use of Nature, not for love of herself only, (Wordsworth, Coleridge, or Byron would have described the spring in the woods for its own sake), but for illustration of humanity. It is Shelley—Shelley in his lonely withdrawn character, Shelley hidden in the wood of his own thoughts, and, like a spring in that wood, bubbling upwards into personal poetry—of whom Browning is now thinking. The image is good, but a better poet would have dwelt more on the fountain and left the insects and birds alone. It is Shelley also of whom he thinks—Shelley "breaking away from personal poetry to write of the fates of men, of liberty and love and overthrow of wrong, of the future of mankind—when he expands his tree-shaded fountain into the river and follows it to the sea :

And then should find it but the fountain head,
Long lost, of some great river washing towns
And towers, and seeing old woods which will live

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But by its banks untrod of human foot
Which when the great sun sinks lie quivering
In light as some thing both half of life
Before God's foot waiting a wondrous change,
Then girt with rocks which seek to turn or stay
Its course in vain for it does ever spread
Like a sea's arm as it goes rolling on,
Being the pulse of some great country—so
Wast thou to me and art thou to the world!

How good some of that is, how bad it is elsewhere! How much it needs thought, concentration, and yet how vivid also and original! And the faults of it, of grammar, of want of clearness, of irritating parenthesis, of broken threads of thought, of inability to leave out the needless, are faults of which Browning never quite cleared his work. I do not think he ever cared to rid himself of them.

The next description is not an illustration of man by means of Nature. It is almost the only set description of Nature, without reference to man, which occurs in the whole of Browning's work. It is introduced by his declaration (for in this I think he speaks from himself) of his power of living in the life of all living things. He does not think of himself as living in the whole Being of Nature, as Wordsworth or Shelley might have done. There was a certain matter of factness in him which prevented his belief in any theory of that kind. But he does transfer himself into the rejoicing life of the animals and plants, a life which he knows is akin to his own. And this distinction is true of all his poetry of Nature. "I can mount with the bird," he says,

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Leaping airily his pyramid of leaves
And twisted boughs of some tall mountain tree,
Or like a fish breathe deep the morning air
In the misty sun-warm water.

This introduces the description of a walk of twenty-four hours through various scenes of natural beauty. It is long and elaborate—the scenery he conceives round the home where he and Pauline are to live. And it is so close, and so much of it is repeated in other forms in his later poetry, that I think it is drawn direct from Nature ; that it is here done of set purpose to show his hand in natural description. It begins with night, but soon leaves night for the morning and the noon. Here is a piece of it :

Morning, the rocks and valleys and old woods.
How the sun brightens in the mist, and here,
Half in the air, like * creatures of the place,
Trusting the elements, living on high boughs
That sway in the wind—look at the silver spray
Flung from the foam-sheet of the cataract
Amid the broken rocks ! Shall we stay here
With the wild hawks ? No, ere the hot noon come
Dive we down—safe ! See, this is our new retreat
Walled in with a sloped mound of matted shrubs,
Dark, tangled, old and green, still sloping down,
To a small pool whose waters lie asleep,
Amid the trailing boughs turned water-plants :
And tall trees overarch to keep us in,
Breaking the sunbeams into emerald shafts,
And in the dreamy water one small group
Of two or three strange trees are got together
Wondering at all around—

This is nerveless work, tentative, talkative, no clear expression of the whole ; and as he tries to

* Creatures accordant with the place ?

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expand it further in lines we may study with interest, for the very failures of genius are interesting, he becomes even more feeble. Yet the feebleness is traversed by verses of power, like lightning flashing through a mist upon the sea. The chief thing to say about this direct, detailed work is that he got out of its manner as fast as he could. He never tried it again, but passed on to suggest the landscape by a few sharp, high-coloured words ; choosing out one or two of its elements and flashing them into prominence. The rest was left to the imagination of the reader.

He is better when he comes forth from the shadowy woodland-pool into the clear air and open landscape :

Up for the glowing day, leave the old woods !
See, they part like a ruined arch : the sky !
Blue sunny air, where a great cloud floats laden
With light, like a dead whale that white birds pick,
Floating away in the sun in some north sea.
Air, air, fresh life-blood, thin and searching air,
The clear, dear breath of God that loveth us,
Where small birds reel and winds take their delight !

The last three lines are excellent, but nothing could be worse than the sensational image of the dead whale. It does not fit the thing he desires to illustrate, and it violates the sentiment of the scene he is describing, but its strangeness pleased his imagination, and he put it in without a question. Alas, in after times, he only too often, both in the poetry of nature and of the human soul, hurried into his verse illustrations which had no natural relation to the matter in hand, just because it

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amused him to indulge his fancy. The finished artist could not do this ; he would hear, as it were, the false note, and reject it. But Browning, a natural artist, never became a perfect one. Nevertheless, as his poetry went on, he reached, by natural power, splendid description, as indeed I have fully confessed , but, on the other hand, one is never sure of him. He is never quite " inevitable."

The attempt at deliberate natural description in *Pauline*, of which I have now spoken, is not renewed in *Paracelsus*. By the time he wrote that poem the movement and problem of the spirit of man had all but quenched his interest in natural scenery. Nature is only introduced as a background, almost a scenic background for the players, who are the passions, thoughts, and aspirations of the intellectual life of Paracelsus. It is only at the beginning of Part II. that we touch a landscape

Over the waters in the vaporous West
The sun goes down as in a sphere of gold
Behind the arm of the city which between ,
With all the length of domes and minarets,
Athwart the splendour, black and crooked runs
Like a Turk veise along a scimitar.

That is all ; nothing but an introduction. Paracelsus turns in a moment from the sight, and absorbs himself in himself, just as Browning was then doing in his own soul. Nearly two thousand lines are then written before Nature is again touched upon, and then Festus and Paracelsus are

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looking at the dawn ; and it is worth saying how in this description Browning's work on Nature has so greatly improved that one can scarcely believe he is the same poet who wrote the wavering descriptions of *Pauline*. This is close and clear :

Morn must be near.

FESTUS. Best ope the casement : see,
The night, late strewn with clouds and flying stars,
Is blank and motionless : how peaceful sleep
The tree-tops all together ! Like an asp *
The wind slips whispering from bough to bough.

* * * * *

PARACELSUS. See, morn at length. The heavy darkness seems
Diluted, grey and clear without the stars ;
The shrubs bestir and rouse themselves as if
Some snake, that weighed them down all night, let go
His hold ; and from the East, fuller and fuller,
Day, like a mighty river, flowing in ;
But clouded, wintry, desolate and cold.

That is good, clear, and sufficient ; and there the description should end. But Browning, driven by some small demon, adds to it three lines of mere observant fancy.

Yet see how that broad prickly star-shaped plant,
Half-down in the crevice, spreads its woolly leaves,
All thick and glistening with diamond dew.

What is that for ? To give local colour or reality ? It does neither. It is mere childish artistry. Tennyson could not have done it. He knew when to stay his hand.†

* Browning, even more than Shelley, was fond of using the snake in his poetry. Italy is in that habit.

† There is a fine picture of the passing of a hurricane in

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The finest piece of natural description in *Paracelsus* is of the coming of Spring. It is full of the joy of life; it is inspired by a passionate thought, lying behind it, concerning man. It is still more inspired by his belief that God himself was eternal joy and filled the universe with rapture. Nowhere did Browning reach a greater height in his Nature poetry than in these lines, yet they are more a description, as usual, of animal life than of the beauty of the earth and sea :

Then all is still ; earth is a wintry clod :
But spring-wind, like a dancing psaltress, passes
Over its breast to waken it, rare verdure
Buds tenderly upon rough banks, between
The withered tree-roots and the cracks of frost,
Like a smile striving with a wrinkled face ;
The grass grows bright, the boughs are swollen with
 blooms
Like chrysalids impatient for the air,
The shining dorrs are busy, beetles run
Along the furrows, ants make their ado ;
Above, birds fly in merry flocks, the lark

Paracelsus (p. 67, vol. i.) which illustrates this inability to stop when he has done all he needs. *Paracelsus* speaks :

 The hurricane is spent,
And the good boat speeds through the brightening
 weather ;
But is it earth or sea that heaves below ?
The gulf rolls like a meadow-swell, o'erstrewn
With ravaged boughs and remnants of the shore ;
And now, some islet, loosened from the land,
Swims past with all its trees, sailing to ocean :
And now the air is full of upturned canes,
Light strippings from the fan-trees, tamarisks
Unrooted, with their birds still clinging to them,
All high in the wind. Even so my varied life
Drifts by me

I think that the lines I have italicised should have been left out. They weaken what he has well done.

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Soars up and up, shivering for very joy ;
Afar the ocean sleeps ; white fishing-gulls
Flit where the strand is purple with its tribe
Of nested limpets ; savage creatures seek
Their loves in wood and plain—and God renews
His ancient rapture.

Once more, in *Paracelsus*, there is the lovely lyric about the flowing of the Mayne. I have driven through that gracious country of low hill and dale and wide water-meadows, where under flowered banks only a foot high the slow river winds in gentleness ; and this poem is steeped in the sentiment of the scenery. But, as before, Browning quickly slides away from the beauty of inanimate nature into a record of the animals that haunt the stream. He could not get on long with mountains and rivers alone. He must people them with breathing, feeling things ; anything for life !

Thus the Mayne glideth
Where my Love abideth.
Sleep's no softer ; it proceeds
On through lawns, on through meads.
On and on, whate'er befall,
Meandering and musical,
Though the niggard pasturage
Bears not on its shaven ledge
Aught but weeds and waving grasses
To view the river as it passes,
Save here and there a scanty patch
Of primroses too faint to catch
A weary bee.

And scarce it pushes
Its gentle way through strangling bushes .
Where the glossy Kingfisher
Flutters when noon-heats are near,
Glad the shelving banks to shun

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Red and steaming in the sun
Where the shrew-mouse with pale throat
Burrows and the speckled stoat
Where the quick sandpipers flit
In and out the marl and grit
That seems to breed them brown as they
Naught disturbs its quiet way
Save some lazy stork that springs
Trailing it with legs and wings
Whom the shy fox from the hill
Rouses creep he ne'er so still

"My heart, they loose my heart, those simple words," cries Paracelsus, and he was right. They tell of that which to see and love is better, wiser, than to probe and know all the problems of knowledge. But that is a truth not understood, not believed. And few there be who find it. And if Browning had found the secret of how to live more outside of his understanding than he did, or having found it, had not forgotten it, he would not perhaps have spoken more wisely for the good of man, but he would have more continuously written better poetry.

The next poem in which he may be said to touch Nature is *Sordello*. *Strafford* does not count, save for the charming song of the boat in music and moonlight, which the children sing. In *Sordello*, the problem of life, as in *Paracelsus*, is still the chief matter, but outward life, as not in *Paracelsus*, takes an equal place with inward life. And naturally, Nature, its changes and beauty, being outward, are more fully treated than in *Paracelsus*. But it is never treated for itself alone. It is made to image or reflect the sentiment of the man who

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sees it, or to illustrate a phase of his passion or his thought. But there is a closer grip upon it than before, a clearer definition, a greater power of concentrated expression of it, and especially, a fuller use of colour. Browning paints Nature now like a Venetian, the very shadows of objects are in colour. This new power was a kind of revelation to him, and he frequently uses it with a personal joy in its exercise. Things in Nature blaze in his poetry now and afterwards in gold, purple, the crimson of blood, in sunlit green and topaz, in radiant blue, in dyes of earthquake and eclipse. Then, when he has done his landscape thus in colour, he adds more, he places in its foreground one drop, one eye of still more flaming colour, to vivify and inflame the whole.

The main landscape of *Sordello* is the plain and the low pine-clad hills around Mantua, the half-circle of the deep lagoon which enarms the battlemented town, and the river Mincio, seen by Sordello when he comes out of the forest on the hill, as it enters and leaves the lagoon, and winds, a silver ribbon, through the plain. It is the landscape Vergil must have loved. A long bridge of more than a hundred arches, with towers of defence, crosses the marsh from the towered gateway of the walls to the mainland, and, in the midst of the lagoon the deep river flows fresh and clear with a steady swiftness. Scarcely anywhere in North Italy is the upper sky more pure at dawn and even, and there is no view now so mystic in its desolation. Over the lagoon, and puffing from it,

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the mists, daily encrimsoned by sunrise and sunset, continually rise and disperse.

The character and the peculiarities of this landscape Browning has seized and enshrined in verse. But his descriptions are so arranged as to reflect certain moments of crisis in the soul of Sordello. He does not describe this striking landscape for its own sake, but for the sake of his human subject. The lines I quote below describe noon-day on the lagoon, seen from the golden woods and black pines ; and the vision of the plain, city and river, suddenly opening out from the wood, symbolises the soul of Sordello opening out from solitude "into the veritable business of mankind."

Then wide
Opened the great morass, shot every side
With flashing water through and through ; a-shine,
Thick steaming, all-alive. Whose shape divine
Quivered i' the farthest rainbow-vapour, glanced
Athwart the flying herons ? He advanced,
But warily, though Mincio leaped no more,
Each footfall burst up in the marish-floor
A diamond jet.

And then he somewhat spoils this excellent thing by a piece of detail too minute for the largeness of the impression. But how clear and how full of true sentiment it is ; and how the image of Palma rainbowed in the mist, and of Sordello seeing her, fills the landscape with youthful passion !

Here is the same view in the morning, when Mincio has come down in flood and filled the marsh :

• Mincio, in its place,
Laughed, a broad water, in next morning's face,

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And, where the mists broke up immense and white
I' the steady wind, burned like a spilth of light
Out of the crashing of a million stars.

It were well to compare that brilliant piece of light with the grey water-sunset at Ferrara in the beginning of Book VI.

While eve slow sank
Down the near terrace to the farther bank
And only one spot left from out the night
Glimmered upon the river opposite —
A breadth of watery heaven like a bay,
A sky-like space of water, ray for ray,
And star for star, one richness where they mixed
As this and that wing of an angel, fixed,
Tumultuary splendours folded in
To die.

As usual, Spring enchants him. The second book begins with her coming, and predicates the coming change in Sordello's soul.

The woods were long austere with snow ; at last
Pink leaflets budded on the beech, and fast
Larches, scattered through pine-tree solitudes,
Brightened, as in the slumbrous heart of the woods
Our buried year, a witch, grew young again
To placid incantations, and that stain
About were from her cauldron, green smoke blent
With those black pines.

Nor does he omit in *Sordello* to recall two other favourite aspects of nature, long since recorded in *Pauline*, the ravine and the woodland spring. Just as Turner repeated in many pictures of the same place what he had first observed in it, so Browning recalled in various poems the first impressions of his youth. He had a curious love for a ravine with

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overhanging trees and a thin thread of water, looping itself round rocks. It occurs in the *Fire-side*, it is taken up in his later poems, and up such a ravine Sordello climbs among the pines of Goito :

He climbed with (June at deep) some close ravine
Mid clatter of its million pebbles sheen,
Over which, singing soft, the rannel slipped
Elate with rains

Then, in *Sordello*, we come again across the fountain in the grove he draws in *Pauline*, now greatly improved in clearness and word-brightness—a real vision. Fate has given him here a fount

Of pure loquacious pearl, the soft tice-tent
Guards, with its face of reate and sedge, not fail
The silver globules and gold-sparkling grail
At bottom—

where the impulse of the water sends up the sand in a cone—a solitary loveliness of Nature that Coleridge and Tennyson have both drawn with a finer pencil than Browning. The other examples of natural description in *Sordello*, as well as those in *Balaustion* I shall reserve till I speak of those poems. As to the dramas they are wholly employed with humanity. In them man's soul has so overmastered Browning that they are scarcely diversified half a dozen times by any illustrations derived from Nature. *

We now come, with *The Ring and the Book*, to a clear division in his poetry of Nature. From this time forth Nature decays in his verse. Man masters it and drives it out. In *The Ring and the Book*, huge

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as it is, Nature rarely intrudes, the human passion of the matter is so great that it swallows up all Browning's interest. There is a little forky flashing description of the entrance to the Val d'Ema in Guido's first statement Caponsacchi is too intensely gathered round the tragedy to use a single illustration from Nature. The only person who does use illustrations from Nature is the only one who is by age, by his life, by the apartness of his high place, capable of sufficient quiet and contemplation to think of Nature at all. This is the Pope.

He illustrates with great vigour the way in which Guido destroyed all the home life which clung about him and himself remained dark and vile, by the burning of a nest-like hut in the Campagna, with all its vines and ivy and flowers, till nothing remains but the blackened walls of the malicious tower round which the hut had been built.

He illustrates the sudden event which, breaking in on Caponsacchi's life, drew out of him his latent power and his inward good, by this vigorous description

As when a thandrous midnight, with black air
That burns rain drops that blister breaks a spell
Draws out the excessive virtue of some sheathed
Shut unsuspected flower that hoards and hides
Immensity of sweetness

And the last illustration, in which the Pope hopes that Guido's soul may yet be saved by the suddenness of his death, is one of the finest pieces of

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natural description in Browning, and reads like one of his own memories :

I stood at Naples once, a night so dark
I could have scarce conjectured there was earth
Anywhere, sky or sea or world at all :
But the night's black was burst through by a blaze—
Thunder struck blow on blow, earth groaned and bore,
Through her whole length of mountain visible :
There lay the city thick and plain with spires,
And, like a ghost disshrouded, white the sea.
So may the truth be flashed out by one blow,
And Guido see, one instant, and be saved.

After *The Ring and the Book*, poor Nature, as one of Browning's mistresses, was somewhat neglected for a time, and he gave himself up to ugly representations of what was odd or twisted in humanity, to its smaller problems, like that contained in *Fifine at the Fair*, to its fantastic impulses, its strange madresses, its basenesses, even its commonplace crimes. These subjects were redeemed by his steady effort to show that underneath these evil developments of human nature lay immortal good ; and that a wise tolerance, based on this underlying godlikeness in man, was the true attitude of the soul towards the false and the stupid in mankind. This had been his attitude from the beginning. It differentiates him from Tennyson, who did not maintain that view ; and at that point he is a nobler poet than Tennyson.

But he became too much absorbed in the intellectual treatment of these side-issues in human nature. And I think that he was left unprotected from this or not held back from it by his having

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almost given up Nature in her relation to man as a subject for his poetry. To love that great, solemn and beautiful Creature, who even when she seems most merciless retains her glory and loveliness, keeps us from thinking too much on the lower problems of humanity, on its ignobler movements; holds before us infinite grandeur, infinite beauty, infinite order, and suggests and confirms within us eternal aspiration. Those intimations of the ideal and endless perfectness which are dimmed within us by the meaner aspects of human life, or by the sordid difficulties of thought which a sensual and wealth-seeking society present to us, are restored to us by her quiet, order and beauty. When he wrote *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau*, *Red Cotton Night-cap Country*, and *The Inn Album*, Nature had ceased to awaken the poetic passion in him, and his poetry suffered from the loss. Its interest lies in the narrow realm of intellectual analysis, not in the large realm of tragic or joyous passion. He became the dissector of corrupt bodies, not the creator of living things.

Nevertheless, in *Fifine at the Fair* there are several intercalated illustrations from Nature, all of which are interesting and some beautiful. The sunset over Sainte-Marie and the Ile Noirmoutier, with the "birds who sing to the dead," and the coming of the nightwind and the tide, is as largely wrought as the description of the mountain rill—the "infant of mist and dew," and its voyage to the sea is minute and delicate. There is also that magnificent description of a sunset which I have

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already quoted. It is drawn to illustrate some remote point in the argument, and is far too magnificent for the thing it illustrates. Yet how few in this long poem, how remote from Browning's heart, are these touches of Nature.

Again, in *The Inn Album* there is a description of an English elm-tree, as an image of a woman who makes marriage life seem perfect, which is interesting because it is the third, and only the third, reference to English scenery in the multitude of Browning's verses. The first is in *Pauline*, the second in that poem, "Oh, to be in England," and this is the third. The woman has never ceased to gaze

On the great elm-tree in the open, posed
Placidly full in front, smooth bole, broad branch,
And leafage, one green plenitude of May.

. . . bosomful

Of lights and shades, murmurs and silences,
Sun-warmth, dew-coolness, squirrel, bee, bird,
High, higher, highest, till the blue proclaims
"Leave Earth, there's nothing better till next step
Heavenward!"

This, save in one line, is not felt or expressed with any of that passion which makes what a poet says completely right.

Browning could not stay altogether in this condition, in which, moreover, his humour was also in abeyance; and in his next book, *Pacchiarotto, &c.*, he broke away from these morbid subjects, and, with that recovery, recovered also some of his old love of Nature. The prologue to that book is poetry; and Nature (though he only describes an

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old stone wall in Italy covered with straying plants) is interwoven with his sorrow and his love, Then, all through the book, even in its most fantastic humour, Nature is not altogether neglected for humanity ; and the poetry, which Browning seemed to have lost the power to create, has partly returned to him. That is also the case in *La Saisiaz*, and I have already spoken of the peculiar elements of the nature-poetry in that work. In the *Dramatic Idyls*, of which he was himself fond ; and in *Jocoseria*, there is very little natural description. The subjects did not allow of it ; but yet Nature sometimes glides in and when she does thrills the verse into a higher humanity. In *Ferishtah's Fancies*, a book full of flying charm, Nature has her proper place, and in the lyrics which close the stories she is not forgotten ; but still there is not the care for her which once ran like a full river of delight through his landscape of human nature. He loved, indeed, that landscape of mankind the most, the plains and hills and woods of human life ; but when he watered it with the great river of Nature his best work was done. Now, as life grew to a close, that river had too much dried up in his poetry.

It was not that he had not the power to describe Nature if he cared. But he did not care. I have spoken of the invented descriptions of morn and noon and sunset in Gerard de Lairese in the book which preceded *Asolando*. They have his trenchant power, words that beat out the scene like strokes of an anvil, but, curiously enough, they are

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quite unsuffused with human feeling ; as if, having once divorced Nature from humanity, he never could bring them together again. Nor is this a mere theory. The Prologue to *Asolando* supports it.

That sorrowful poem, written, it seems, in the year he died (1889), reveals his position towards Nature when he had lost the power of youth to pour fire on the world. It is full of his last thinking, "The poet's age is sad," he says. "In youth his eye lent to everything in the natural world the colours of his own soul, the rainbow glory of imagination :

And now a flower is just a flower -
Man, bird, beast are but beast, bird, man -
Simply themselves, uninct by dower
Of dyes which, when life's day began,
Round each in glory ran.

"Ah! what would you have?" he says. "What is the best : things draped in colour, as by a lens, or the naked things themselves? truth ablaze, or falsehood's fancy haze? I choose the first."

It is an old man's effort to make the best of age. For my part, I do not see that the things are the better for losing the colour the soul gives them. The things themselves are indifferent. But as seen by the soul, they are seen in God, and the colour and light which imagination gives them are themselves divine. Nor is their colour or light only in our imagination, but in themselves also, part of the glory and beauty of God. A flower is never only

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a flower, or a beast a beast. And so Browning would have said in the days when he was still a lover of Nature as well as of man, when he was still a faithful soldier in the army of imagination, a poet more than a philosopher at play. It is a sad business. He has not lost his eagerness to advance, to climb beyond the flaming walls, to find God in his heaven. He has not lost the great hopes with which he began, nor the ideals he nursed of old. He has not lost his fighting power, nor his cheerful cry that life is before him in the fulness of the world to come. The *Réverie* and the *Epilogue* to *Asolando* are noble statements of his courage, faith, and joy. There is nothing sad there, nothing to make us beat the breast. But there is sadness in this abandonment of the imaginative glory with which once he clothed the world of Nature; and he ought to have retained it. He would have done so had he not forgotten Nature in anatomising man.

However, he goes on with his undying effort to make the best of things, and though he has lost his rapture in Nature, he has not lost his main theory of man's life and of the use of the universe. The end of this *Prologue* puts it as clearly as it was put in *Paracelsus*. Nothing is changed in that.

"At Asolo," he continues, "my Asolo, when I was young, all natural objects were palpably clothed with fire. They mastered me, not I them. Terror was in their beauty. I was like Moses, before the Bush that burned. I adored the splendour I saw. Then I was in danger of being content

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with it ; ofⁿ mistaking the finite for the infinite beauty. To be satisfied—that was the peril. Now I see the natural world as it is, without the rainbow hues the soul bestowed upon it. Is that well ? In one sense yes.

And now ? The lambent flame is—where ?
Lost from the naked world ; earth, sky,
Hill, vale, tree, flower—Italia's rare
O'er-running beauty crowds the eye—
But flame ?—The Bush is bare.

All is distinct, naked, clear, Nature and nothing else. Have I lost anything in getting down to fact instead of to fancy ? Have I shut my eyes in pain—pain for disillusion ? No—now I know that my home is not in Nature ; there is no awe and splendour in her which can keep me with her. Oh, far beyond is the true splendour, the infinite source of awe and love which transcends her :

No, for the purged ear apprehends
Earth's import, not the eye late dazed :
The Voice said " Call my works thy friends !
At Nature dost thou shrink amazed ?
God is it who transcends."

All Browning is in that way of seeing the matter ; but he forgets that he could see it in the same fashion while he still retained the imaginative outlook on the world of Nature. And the fact is that he did do so in *Paracelsus*, in *Easter-Day*, in a host of other poems. There was then no need for him to reduce to naked fact the glory with which young imagination clothed the world, in order to

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realise that God transcended Nature. He had conceived that truth and believed it long ago. And this explanation, placed here, only tells us that he had lost his ancient love of Nature, and it is sorrowful to understand it of him.

Finally, the main contentions of this chapter, which are drawn from a chronological view of Browning's treatment of Nature, are perhaps worth a summary. The first is that, though the love of Nature was always less in him than his love of human nature, yet for the first half of his work it was so interwoven with his human poetry that Nature suggested to him humanity and humanity Nature. And these two, as subjects for thought and feeling, were each uplifted and impassioned, illustrated and developed, by this intercommunion. This was a true and high position. Humanity was first, Nature second in Browning's poetry, but both were linked together in a noble marriage; and at that time he wrote his best poetry.

The second thing, this chronological treatment of his Nature-poetry shows, is that his interest in human nature pushed out his love of Nature, gradually at first, but afterwards more swiftly, till Nature became almost non-existent in his poetry. With that his work sank down into intellectual or ethical exercises, in which poetry decayed.

It shows, thirdly, how the love of Nature, returning, but returning with diminished power, entered again into his love of human nature, and renewed the passion of his poetry, its singing, and its health. But reconciliations of this kind do

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not bring back all the ancient affection and happiness. Nature and humanity never lived together in his poetry in as vital a harmony as before, nor was the work done on them as good as it was of old. A broken marriage is not repaired by an apparent condonation. Nature and humanity, though both now dwelt in him, kept separate rooms. Their home-life was destroyed. Browning had been drawn away by a *Fifine* of humanity. He never succeeded in living happily again with Elvire ; and while our intellectual interest in his work remained, our poetic interest in it lessened. We read it for mental and ethical entertainment, not for ideal joy.

No ; if poetry is to be perfectly written ; if the art is to be brought to its noblest height ; if it is to continue to lift the hearts of men into the realm where perfection lives ; if it is to glow, an unwearied fire, in the world ; the love of Nature must be justly mingled in it with the love of humanity. The love of humanity must be first, the love of Nature second, but they must not be divorced. When they are, when the love of Nature forms the only subject, or when the love of Man forms the only subject, poetry decays and dies.

CHAPTER IV

BROWNING'S THEORY OF HUMAN LIFE

PAULINE AND PARACELSUS

To isolate Browning's view of Nature, and to leave it behind us, seemed advisable before speaking of his work as a poet of mankind. We can now enter freely on that which is most distinctive, most excellent in his work—his human poetry ; and the first thing that meets us and in his very first poems, is his special view of human nature, and of human life, and of the relation of both to God. It marks his originality that this view was entirely his own. Ancient thoughts of course are to be found in it, but his combination of them is original amongst the English poets. It marks his genius that he wrought out this conception while he was yet so young. It is partly shaped in *Pauline* ; it is fully set forth in *Paracelsus*. And it marks his consistency of mind that he never changed it. I do not think he ever added to it or developed it. It satisfied him when he was a youth, and when he was an old man. We have already seen it clearly expressed in the *Prologue to Asolando*.

That theory needs to be outlined, for till it is understood Browning's poetry cannot be understood or loved as fully as we should desire to love

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it. It exists in *Pauline*, but all its elements are in solution ; uncombined, but waiting the electric flash which will mix them, in due proportion, into a composite substance, having a lucid form, and capable of being used. That flash was sent through the confused elements of *Pauline*, and the result was *Paracelsus*.

I will state the theory first, and then, lightly passing through *Pauline* and *Paracelsus*, re-tell it. It is fitting to apologise for the repetition which this method of treatment will naturally cause ; but, considering that the theory underlies every drama and poem that he wrote during sixty years, such repetition does not seem unnecessary. There are many who do not easily grasp it, or do not grasp it at all, and they may be grateful. As to those who do understand it, they will be happy in their anger with any explanation of what they know so well.

He asks what is the secret of the world : " of man and man's true purpose, path and fate." He proposes to understand " God, and his works and all God's intercourse with the human soul."

We are here, he thinks, to grow enough to be able to take our part in another life or lives. But we are surrounded by limitations which baffle and retard our growth. That is miserable, but not so much as we think ; for the failures these limitations cause prevent us—and this is a main point in Browning's view—from being content with our conditions on the earth. There is that within us which is always endeavouring to transcend those limitations, and which believes in their final

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dispersal. This aspiration rises to something higher than any possible actual on earth. It is never worn out ; it is the divine in us ; and when it seems to decay, God renews it by spiritual influences from without and within, coming to us from nature as seen by us, from humanity as felt by us, and from himself who dwells in us.

But then, unless we find out and submit to those limitations, and work within them, life is useless, so far as any life is useless. But while we work within them, we see beyond them an illimitable land and thirst for it. This battle between the dire necessity of working in chains and longing for freedom, between the infinite destiny of the soul and the baffling of its effort to realise its infinitude on earth, makes the storm and misery of life. We may try to escape that tempest and sorrow by determining to think, feel, and act only within our limitations, to be content with them as Goethe said ; but if we do, we are worse off than before. We have thrown away our divine destiny. If we take this world and are satisfied with it, cease to aspire, beyond our limits, to full perfection in God ; if our soul should ever say, " I want no more ; what I have here—the pleasure, fame, knowledge, beauty or love of this world—is all I need or care for," then we are indeed lost. That is the last damnation. The worst failure, the deepest misery, is better than contentment with the success of earth ; and seen in this light, the failures and misery of earth are actually good things, the cause of a chastened joy. They open to us the larger

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light. They suggest, and in Browning's belief they proved, that this life is but the threshold of an infinite life, that our true life is beyond, that there is an infinite of happiness, of knowledge, of love, of beauty which we shall attain. Our failures are prophecies of eternal successes. To choose the finite life is to miss the infinite Life! O fool, to claim the little cup of water earth's knowledge offers to thy thirst, or the beauty or love of earth, when the immeasurable waters of the Knowledge, Beauty and Love of the Eternal Paradise are thine beyond the earth.

Two things are then clear : (1) The attainment of our desires for perfection, the satisfaction of our passion for the infinite, is forbidden to us on earth by the limitations of life. We are made imperfect ; we are kept imperfect here ; and we must do all our work within the limits this natural imperfection makes. (2) We must, nevertheless, not cease to strive towards the perfection unattainable on earth, but which shall be attained hereafter. Our destiny, the God within us, demands that. And we lose it, if we are content with our earthly life, even with its highest things, with knowledge, beauty, or with love.

Hence, the foundation of Browning's theory is a kind of Original Sin in us, a natural defectiveness ~~temperately~~ imposed on us by God, which prevents us attaining any absolute success on earth. And this defectiveness of nature is met by the truth, which, while we aspire, we know—that God will fulfil all noble desire in a life to come.

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We must aspire then, but at the same time all aspiring is to be conterminous with steady work within our limits. Aspiration to the perfect is not to make us idle, indifferent to the present, but to drive us on. Its passion teaches us, as it urges into action all our powers, what we can and what we cannot do. That is, it teaches us, through the action it engenders, what our limits are, and when we know them, the main duties of life rise clear. The first of these is, to work patiently within our limits, and the second is the apparent contradiction of the first—never to be satisfied with our limits, or with the results we attain within them. Then, having worked within them, but always looked beyond them, we, as life closes, learn the secret. The failures of earth prove the victory beyond. “For—

what is our failure here but a triumph's evidence
For the fulness of the days? Have we withered or
agonised?
Why else was the pause prolonged but that singing might
issue thence?
Why rushed the discord in but that harmony should
be prized?
Sorrow is hard to bear and doubt is slow to clear
Each sufferer says his way his scheme of the weal and
the woe
But God has a few of us whom he whispers in the ear
The rest may reason and welcome, 'tis we musicians
know.

Abt Vogler

Finally, the root and flower of this patient but
uncontented work is Love for man because of his
being in God, because of his high and immortal.

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destiny. All that we do, whether failure or not, builds up the perfect humanity to come, and flows into the perfection of God in whom is the perfection of man. This love, grounded on this faith, brings joy into life; and, in this joy of love, we enter into the eternal temple of the Life to come. Love opens Heaven while Earth closes us round. At last limitations cease to trouble us. They are lost in the vision, they bring no more sorrow, doubt or baffling. Therefore, in this confused chaotic time on earth—

Earn the means first. God surely will contrive
Use for our earning
Others mistrust, and say: "But time escapes;
Live now or never!"
He said, "What's time? Leave Now for dogs and
apes!
Man has forever."

A Grammarian's Funeral.

This is a sketch of his explanation of life. The expression of it began in *Pauline*. Had that poem been as imitative, as poor as the first efforts of poets usually are, we might leave it aside. But though, as he said, "good draughtsmanship and right handling were far beyond the artist at that time," though "with repugnance and purely of necessity," he republished it, he did republish it; and he was right. It was crude and confused, but the stuff in it was original and poetic; wonderful stuff for a young man.

- The first design of it was huge. *Pauline* is but a fragment of a poem which was to represent, not one but various types of human life. It became

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only the presentation of the type of the poet, the first sketch of the youth of Sordello. The other types conceived were worked up into other poems.

The hero in *Pauline* hides in his love for Pauline from a past he longed to forget. He had aspired to the absolute beauty and goodness, and the end was vanity and vexation. The shame of this failure beset him from the past, and the failure was caused because he had not been true to the aspirations which took him beyond himself. When he returned to self, the glory departed. And a fine simile of his soul as a young witch whose blue eyes,

As she stood naked by the river springs,
Drew down a God,

who, as he sat in the sunshine on her knees singing of heaven, saw the mockery in her eyes and vanished, tells of how the early ravishment departed, slain by self-scorn that followed on self-worship. But one love and reverence remained—that for Shelley, the Sun-treader, and kept him from being “wholly lost.” To strengthen this one self-forgetful element, the love of Pauline enters in, and the new impulse brings back something of the ancient joy. “Let me take it,” he cries, “and sing on again

‘fast as fancies come;
Rudely, the verse being as the mood it paints,”—

a line which tells us how Browning wished his metrical movement to be judged. This is the exordium, and it is already full of his theory of life

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—the soul forced from within to aspire to the perfect whole, the necessary failure, the despair, the new impulse to love arising out of the despair ; failure making fresh growth, fresh discontentment. God has sent a new impulse from without ; let me begin again.

Then, in the new light, he strips his mind bare. What am I ? What have I done ? Where am I going ?

The first element in his soul, he thinks, is a living personality, linked to a principle of restlessness,

Which would be all, have, see, know, taste, feel, all.

And this would plunge him into the depths of self were it not for that Imagination in him whose power never fails to bear him beyond himself ; and is finally in him a need, a trust, a yearning after God ; whom, even when he is most lost, he feels is always acting on him, and at every point of life transcending him.

And Imagination began to create, and made him at one with all men and women of whom he had read (the same motive is repeated in *Sordello*), but especially at one with those out of the Greek world he loved—" a God wandering after Beauty"—
" a high-crested chief

Sailing with troops of friends to Tenedos.

Never was anything more clear than these lives he lived beyond himself ; and the lines in which he

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records the vision have all the sharpness and beauty of his after-work—

I had not seen a work of lofty art,
Nor woman's beauty nor sweet Nature's face,
Yet, I say, never morn broke clear as those
On the dim-clustered isles in the blue sea,
The deep groves and white temples and wet caves :
And nothing ever will surprise me now—
Who stood beside the naked Swift-footed,
Who bound my forehead with Proserpine's hair.

Yet, having this infinite world of beauty, he aimed low ; lost in immediate wants, striving only for the mortal and the possible, while all the time there lived in him, breathing with keen desire, powers which, developed, would make him at one with the infinite Life of God.

But having thus been untrue to his early aspiration, he fell into the sensual life, like Paracelsus, and then, remorseful, sought peace in self-restraint ; but no rest, no contentment was gained that way. It is one of Browning's root-ideas that peace is not won by repression of the noble passions, but by letting them loose in full freedom to pursue after their highest aims. Not in restraint, but in the conscious impetuosity of the soul towards the divine realities, is the wisdom of life. Many poems are consecrated to this idea.

So, cleansing his soul by ennobling desire, he sought to realise his dreams in the arts, in the creation and expression of pure Beauty. And he followed Poetry and Music and Painting, and chiefly explored passion and mind in the great poets. Fed at these deep springs, his soul rose

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into keen life ; his powers burst forth, and gazing on all systems and schemes of philosophy and government, he heard ineffable things, unguessed by man. All Plato entered into him ; he vowed himself to liberty and the new world where " men were to be as gods and earth as heaven." Thus, but here on earth, not only beyond the earth, he would attain the Perfect. Man also shall attain it ; and so thinking, he turned, like Sordello, to look at and learn mankind, pondering " how best life's end might be attained—an end comprising every joy."

And even as he believed, the glory vanished ; everything he had hoped for broke to pieces :

First went my hopes of perfecting mankind,
Next—faith in them, and then in freedom's self
And virtue's self, then my own motives, ends
And aims and loves, and human love went last.

And then, with the loss of all these things of the soul which bear a man's desires into the invisible and unreachable, he gained the world, and success in it. All the powers of the mere Intellect, that grey-haired deceiver whose name is Archimago, were his ;—wit, mockery, analytic force, keen reasoning on the visible, the Understanding's absolute belief in itself ; its close grasp on what it called facts, and its clear application of knowledge for clear ends. God, too, had vanished in this intellectual satisfaction ; and in the temple of his soul, where He had been worshipped, troops of shadows now knelt to the man whose intellect,

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having grasped all knowledge, was content ; and hailed him as king.

The position he describes is like that Wordsworth states in the *Prelude* to have been his, when, after the vanishing of his aspirations for man which followed the imperialistic ending of the French Revolution, he found himself without love or hope, but with full power to make an intellectual analysis of nature and of human nature—and was destroyed thereby. It is the same position which Paracelsus attains and which is followed by the same ruin. It is also, so far as its results are concerned, the position of the Soul described by Tennyson in *The Palace of Art*.

Love, emotion, God are shut out. Intellect and knowledge of the world's work take their place. And the result is the slow corrosion of the soul by pride. "I have nursed up energies," says Browning, "they will prey on me." He feels this and breaks away from its death. "My heart must worship," he cries. The "shadows" know this feeling is against them, and they shout in answer :

"Thyself, thou art our king !"

But the end of that is misery. Therefore he begins to aspire again, but still, not for the infinite of perfection beyond, but for a finite perfection on, the earth.

"I will make every joy here my own," he cries, "and then I will die." "I will have one rapture to fill all the soul." "All knowledge shall be

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mine"—it is the aspiration of Paracelsus. "I will live in the whole of Beauty, and here it shall be mine"—it is the aspiration of Aprile. "Then, having this perfect human soul, master of all powers, I shall break forth, at some great crisis in history, and lead the world." This is the very aspiration of Sordello.

But when he tries for this, he finds failure at every point. Everywhere he is limited; his soul demands what his body refuses to fulfil; he is always baffled, falling short, chained down and maddened by restrictions; unable to use what he conceives, to grasp as a tool what he can reach in Thought; hating himself; imagining what might be, and driven back from it in despair.

Even in his love for Pauline, in which he has skirted the infinite and known that his soul cannot accept finality—he finds that in him which is still unsatisfied.

What does this puzzle mean? "It means," he answers, "that this earth's life is not my only sphere,

Can I so narrow sense but that in life
Soul still exceeds it?"

Yet, he will try again. He has lived in all human life, and his craving is still athirst. He has not yet tried Nature herself. She seems to have undying beauty, and his feeling for her is now, of course, doubled by his love for Pauline. "Come with me," he cries to her, "come out of the world into natural beauty"; and there follows a noble

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description of a lovely country into which he passes from a mountain glen—morning, noon, afternoon and evening all described—and the emotion of the whole rises till it reaches the topmost height of eagerness and joy, when, suddenly, the whole fire is extinguished—

I am consecrated—I feel ;
But my soul saddens when it looks beyond :
I cannot be immortal, taste all joy.

O God, where do they tend—these struggling aims ?
What would I have ? What is this "sleep " which
seems
To bound all ? Can there be a " waking " point
Of crowning life ?

* * * * *
And what is that I hunger for but God ?

So, having worked towards perfection, having realised that he cannot have it here, he sees at last that the failures of earth are a prophecy of a perfection to come. He claims the infinite beyond. " I believe," he cries, " in God and truth and love. Know my last state is happy, free from doubt or touch of fear."

That is Browning all over. These are the motives of a crowd of poems, varied through a crowd of examples ; never better shaped than in the trenchant and magnificent end of *Easter-Day*, where the questions and answers are like the flashing and clashing of sharp scimitars. Out of the same quarry from which *Pauline* was hewn the rest were hewn. They are polished, richly sculptured, hammered into fair form, but the stone is the same. Few have been so consistent as

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Browning, few so true to their early inspiration.
He is among those happy warriors

Who, when brought
Among the tasks of real life have wrought
Upon the plan that pleased their boyish thought.

This, then, is *Pauline* ; I pass on to *Paracelsus*.
Paracelsus, in order to give the poem a little local colour, opens at Würzburg in a garden, and in the year 1512. But it is not a poem which has to do with any place or any time. It belongs only to the country of the human soul. The young student Paracelsus is sitting with his friends Festus and Michal, on the eve of his departure to conquer the whole world by knowledge. They make a last effort to retain him, but even as he listens to their arguments his eyes are far away—

As if where'er he gazed there stood a star,

so strong, so deep is desire to attain his aim.

For Paracelsus aims to know the whole of knowledge. Quiet and its charms, this home-like garden of still work, make their appeal in vain. "God has called me," he cries ; "these burning desires to know all are his voice in me ; and if I stay and plod on here, I reject his call who has marked me from mankind. I must reach pure knowledge. That is my only aim, my only reward."

Then Festus replies : "In this solitariness of aim, all other interests of humanity are left out. Will knowledge, alone, give you enough for life ? You, a man !" And again : "You discern your

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purpose clearly ; have you any security of attaining it ? Is it not more than mortal power is capable of winning ? ” Or again “ Have you any knowledge of the path to knowledge ? ” Or, once more, “ Is anything in your mind so clear as this, your own desire to be singly famous ? ”

“ All this is nothing,” Paracelsus answers ; “ the restless force within me will overcome all difficulties. God does not give that fierce energy without giving also that which it desires. And, I am chosen out of all the world to win this glory ”

“ Why not then,” says Festus, “ make use of knowledge already gained ? Work here, what knowledge will you gain in deserts ? ”

“ I have tried all the knowledge of the past,” Paracelsus replies, “ and found it a contemptible failure. Others were content with the scraps they won. Not I ! I want the whole, the source and sum of divine and human knowledge, and though I craze as even one truth expands its infinitude before me, I go forth alone, rejecting all that others have done, to prove my own soul. I shall arrive at last. And as to mankind, in winning perfect knowledge I shall serve them ; but then all intercourse ends between them and me I will not be served by those I serve.”

“ Oh,” answers Festus, “ is that cause sake which produces carelessness of human love ? You have thrown aside all the helps of human knowledge ; now you reject all sympathy. No man can thrive who dares to claim to serve the race, while he is bound by no single tie to the race. You would

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be a being knowing not what Love is—a monstrous spectacle ! ”

“ That may be true,” Paracelsus replies, “ but for the time I will have nothing to do with feeling. My affections shall remain at rest, and then, *when* I have attained my single aim, when knowledge is all mine, my affections will awaken purified and chastened by my knowledge. Let me, unhampered by sympathy, win my victory. And I go forth certain of victory.”

Are there not, Festus, are there not, dear Michal,
Two points in the adventure of the diver :
One—when, a beggar, he prepares to plunge ;
One—when, a prince, he rises with his pearl ?
Festus, I plunge !
FESTUS. We wait you when you rise.

So ends the first part, and the second opens ten years afterwards in a Greek Conjurer’s house in Constantinople, with Paracelsus writing down the result of his work. And the result is this :

“ I have made a few discoveries, but I could not stay to use them. Nought remains but a ceaseless, hungry pressing forward, a vision now and then of truth ; and I— I am old before my hour : the adage is true—

Time fleets, youth fades, life is an empty dream ;
~~and~~ now I would give a world to rest, even in
! :

“ This is all my gain. Was it for this,” he cries, “ I subdued my life, lost my youth, rooted out love ; for the sake of this wolfish thirst of

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knowledge?" No dog, said Faust, in Goethe's poem, driven to the same point by the weariness of knowledge, no dog would longer live this life. My tyrant aim has brought me into a desert; worse still, the purity of my aim is lost. Can I truly say that I have worked for man alone? Sadder still, if I had found that which I sought, should I have had power to use it? O God, Thou who art pure mind, spare my mind. Thus far, I have been a man. Let me conclude, a man! Give me back one hour of my young energy, that I may use and finish what I know.

"And God is good: I started sure of that; and he may still renew my heart.

•
True, I am worn;
But who clothes summer, who is life itself?
God, that created all things, can renew!"

At this moment the voice of Aprile is heard singing the song of the poets, who, having great gifts, refused to use them, or abused them, or were too weak; and who therefore live apart from God, mourning for ever; who gaze on life, but live no more. He breaks in on Paracelsus, and, in a long passage of overlapping thoughts, Aprile—who would love infinitely and be loved, aspiring to realise every form of love, as Paracelsus has aspired to realise the whole of knowledge—makes Paracelsus feel that love is what he wants. And then, when Paracelsus realises this, Aprile in turn realises that he wants knowledge. Each recognises that he is the complement of the other, that

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knowledge is worthless without love, and love incapable of realising its aspirations without knowledge—as if love did not contain the sum of knowledge necessary for fine being. Both have failed; and it seems, at first, that they failed because they did not combine their aims. But the chief reason of their failure—and this is, indeed, Browning's main point—is that each of them tried to do more than our limits on earth permit. Paracelsus would have the whole sum of knowledge; Aprile nothing less than the whole of love; here *in this world*. It is impossible; yet, were it possible, could they have attained the sum of knowledge and of love on earth and been satisfied therewith, they would have shut out the infinite of knowledge and love beyond them in the divine land, and been, in their satisfaction, more hopelessly lost than they are in their present wretchedness. Failure that leaves an unreached ideal before the soul is in reality a greater boon than success which thinks perfect satisfaction has been reached. Their aim at perfection is right: what is wrong is their view that failure is ruin, and not a prophecy of a greater glory to come. Could they have thought perfection were attained on earth—were they satisfied with anything this world can give, no longer stung with hunger for the infinite—all Paradise, with the illimitable glories, were closed to them!

Few passages are more beautiful in English poetry than that in which Aprile narrates his youthful aspiration: how, loving all things

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infinitely, he wished to throw them into absolute beauty of form by means of all the arts, for the love of men, and receive from men love for having revealed beauty, and merge at last in God, the Eternal Love. This was his huge aim, his full desire.

Few passages are more pathetic than that in which he tells his failure and its cause. "Time is short : the means of life are limited ; we have no means answering to our desires. Now I am wrecked ; for the multitudinous images of beauty which filled my mind forbade my seizing upon one which I could have shaped. I often wished to give one to the world, but the others came round and baffled me ; and, moreover, I could not leave the multitude of beauty for the sake of one beauty. Unless I could embody all I would embody none.

" And, afterwards, when a cry came from man, "Give one ray even of your hoarded light to us," and I tried for man's sake to select one, why, then, mists came—old memories of a thousand sweetnesses, a storm of images—till it was impossible to choose ; and so I failed, and life is ended.

" But could I live I would do otherwise. I would give a trifle out of beauty, as an example, by which men could guess the rest and love it all ; one strain from an angel's song ; one flower from the distant land, that men might know that such things were. Then, too, I would put common life into loveliness, so that the lowest hind would find me beside him to put his weakest hope and fear into noble language. And as I thus lived with men,

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and for them, I should win from them thoughts fitted for their progress, the very commonest of which would come forth in beauty, for they would have been born in a soul filled full of love. This should now be my aim : no longer that desire to embrace the whole of beauty which isolates a man from his fellows ; but to realise enough of loveliness to give pleasure to men who desire to love. Therefore, I should live, still aspiring to the whole, still discontent, but waiting for another life to gain the whole ; but at the same time content, for man's sake, to work within the limitations of life ; not grieving either for failure, because love given and received makes failure pleasure. In truth, the failure to grasp all on earth makes, if we love, the certainty of a success beyond the earth."

And Paracelsus listening and applying what Aprile says to his old desire to grasp, apart from men, the whole of knowledge as Aprile had desired to grasp the whole of love, learns the truth at last, and confesses it :

Love me henceforth, Aprile, while I learn
To love ; and, merciful God, forgive us both !
We wake at length from weary dreams ; but both
Have slept in fairy-land : though dark and drear
Appears the world before us, we no less
Wake with our wrists and ankles jewelled still.
I too have sought to know as thou to love—
Excluding love as thou refusedst knowledge.

We are halves of a dissevered world, and we must never part till the Knower love, and the Lover know, and both are saved.

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"No, no ; that is not all," Aprile answers, and dies. "Our perfection is not in ourselves but in God. Not our strength, but our weakness is our glory. Not in union with me, with earthly love alone, will you find the perfect life. I am not that you seek. It is God the King of Love, his world beyond, and the infinite creations Love makes in it."

But Paracelsus does not grasp that last conclusion. He only understands that he has left out love in his aim, and therefore failed. He does not give up the notion of attainment upon earth. He cannot lose the first imprint of his idea of himself—his lonely grasp of the whole of Knowledge.

The next two parts of the poem do not strengthen much the main thoughts. Paracelsus tries to work out the lesson learnt from Aprile to add love to knowledge, to aspire to that fulness in God. But he does not love enough. He despises those who follow him for the sake of his miracles, yet he desires their worship. Moreover, the pride of knowledge still clings to him ; he cannot help thinking it higher than love ; and the two together drive him into the thought that this world must give him satisfaction. So, he puts aside the ideal aim. But here also he is baffled. Those who follow him as the great teacher ask of him signs. He gives these ; and he finds at Basel that he has sunk into the desire of vulgar fame, and prostituted his knowledge ; and, sick of this, beaten back from his noble ambitions, he determines to have something at least out of earth, and chooses at Colmar

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the life of sensual pleasure "I still aspire," he cries. "I will give the night to study, but I will keep the day for the enjoyment of the senses. Thus, intellect and sense woven together, I shall at least have attained something. If I do not gain knowledge I shall have gained sensual pleasure. Man I despise and hate, and God has deceived me. I take the world." But, even while he says this, his ancient aspiration lives so much in him that he scorns himself for his fall as much as he scorns the crown.

Then comes the last scene, when, at Salzburg, he returns to find his friend Festus, and to die. In the hour of his death he reviews his whole life, his aims, then failure and the reason of it, and yet dies triumphant for he has found the truth.

I pass over the pathetic delirium in which Paracelsus thinks that Aprile is present, and cries for his hand and sympathy while Festus is watching by the couch. At last he awakes, and knows his friend, and that he is dying. "I am happy," he cries, "my foot is on the threshold of boundless life, I see the whole whirl and hurricane of life behind me, all my life passes by, and I know its purpose, to what end it has brought me, and whither I am going. I will tell you all the meaning of life. Festus, my friend, tell it to the world."

"There was a time when I was happy; the secret of life was in that happiness." "When, when, was that?" answers Festus, "all I hope that answer will decide."

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PAR When but the time I vowed myself to man ?
FEST Great God thy judgments are inscrutable !

Then he explains. "There are men, so majestic is our nature, who, hungry for joy and truth, win more and more of both, and know that life is infinite progress in God. Thus they win by long and slow battle. But there are those, of whom I was one"—and here Browning draws the man of genius—"who are born at the very point to which these others, the men of talent, have painfully attained. By intuition genius knows, and I knew at once, what God is, what we are, what life is. Alas ! I could not use the knowledge aright. There is an answer to the passionate longings of the heart for fulness, and I knew it. And the answer is this : Live in all things outside of yourself by love and you will have joy. That is the life of God, it ought to be our life. In him it is accomplished and perfect ; but in all created things it is a lesson learned slowly again & difficulty.

"Thus I knew the truth, but I was led away from it. I broke down from thinking of myself, my fame, and of this world. I had not love enough and I lost the truth for a time. But whatever my failures were, I never lost sight of it altogether. I never was content with myself or with the earth. Out of my misery I cried for the joy God has in living outside of himself in love of all things."

Then, thrilled with this thought, he breaks forth into a most noble description—new in English poetry, new in feeling and in thought, enough of itself to lift Browning on to his lofty peak—first, of

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the joy of God in the Universe he makes incessantly by pouring out of himself his life, and, secondly, of the joy of all things in God. "Where dwells enjoyment there is He." But every realised enjoyment looks forward, even in God, to a new and higher sphere of distant glory, and when that is reached, to another sphere beyond—

thus climbs
Pleasure its heights for ever and for ever.

Creation is God's joyous self-giving. The building of the frame of earth was God's first joy in Earth. That made him conceive a greater joy—the joy of clothing the earth, of making life therein—of the love which in animals, and last in man, multiplies life for ever.

So there is progress of all things to man, and all created things before his coming have—in beauty, in power, in knowledge, in dim shapes of love and trust in the animals—had prophecies of him which man has realised, hints and provisions, dimly picturing the higher race, till man appeared at last, and one stage of being was complete. But the law of progress does not cease now man has come. None of his faculties are perfect. They also by their imperfection suggest a further life, in which as all that was unfinished in the animals suggested man, so also that which is unfinished in us suggests ourselves in higher place and form. **Man's self is not yet Man.** *

"We learn this not only from our own boundless desires for higher life, and from our sense of

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imperfection. We learn it also when we look back on the whole of nature that was before we were. We illustrate and illuminate all that has been. Nature is humanised, spiritualised by us. We have imprinted ourselves on all things ; and this, as we realise it, as we give thought and passion to lifeless nature, makes us understand how great we are, and how much greater we are bound to be. We are the end of nature but not the end of ourselves. We learn the same truth when among us the few men of genius appear ; stars in the darkness. We do not say—These stand alone ; we never can become as they. On the contrary, we cry : All are to be what these are, and more. They longed for more, and we and they shall have it. All shall be perfected ; and then, and not till then, begins the new age and the new life, new progress and new joy. This is the ultimate truth.

“And as in inferior creatures there were prognostics of man—and here Browning repeats himself—so in man there are prognostics of the future and loftier humanity.

August anticipations, symbols, types
Of a dim splendour ever on before
In that eternal cycle life pursues.

For men begin to pass their nature's bound—

ceaselessly outgrowing themselves in history, and in the individual life—and some, passionately aspiring, run ahead of even the general tendency, and conceive the very highest, and live to reveal it, and in revealing it lift and save those who do not conceive it.

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"I, Paracelsus," he cries—and now Browning repeats the whole argument of the poem—"was one of these. To do this, I vowed myself, soul and limb.

"But I mistook my means, I took the wrong path, led away by pride. I gazed on power alone, and on power won by knowledge alone. This I thought was the only note and aim of man, and it was to be won at once and in the present, without any care for all that man had already done. I rejected all the past. I despised it as a record of weakness and disgrace. Man should be all-sufficient now; a single day should bring him to maturity. He has power to reach the whole of knowledge at one leap.

"In that, I mistook the conditions of life. I did not see our barriers; nor that progress is slow; nor that every step of the past is necessary to know and to remember; nor that, in the shade of the past, the present stands forth bright; nor that the future is not to be all at once, but to dawn on us, in zone after zone of quiet progress. I strove to laugh down all the limits of our life, and then the smallest things broke me down—me, who tried to realise the impossible on earth. At last I knew that the power I sought was only God's, and then I prayed to die. All my life was failure.

"At this crisis I met Aprile, and learned my deep mistake. I had left love out; and love and knowledge, and power through knowledge, must go together. And Aprile had also failed, for he

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had sought love and rejected knowledge. Life can only move when both are hand in hand

love preceding

Power, and with much power always much more love
Love still too straitened in its present means
And earnest for new power to set love free
I learned this and supposed the whole was learned

" But to learn it, and to fulfil it, are two different things. I taught the simple truth, but men would not have it. They sought the complex, the sensational, the knowledge which amazed them. And for this knowledge they praised me. I loathed and despised their praise, and when I would not give them more of the signs and wonders I first gave them, they avenged themselves by casting shame on my real knowledge. Then I was tempted, and became the charlatan; and yet despised myself for seeking man's praise for that which was most contemptible in me. Then I sought for wild pleasure in the senses, and I hated myself still more. And hating myself I came to hate men, and then all that Aprile taught to me was lost.

" But now I know that I did not love enough to trace beneath the hate of men their love. I did not love enough to see in their follies the grain of divine wisdom.

To see a good in evil, and a hope
In ill-success, to sympathise be proud
Of their half-reasons, faint aspirations, dim
Struggles for truth, their poorest fallacies,
Their prejudice and fears and cares and doubts,
All with a touch of nobleness, despite
Their error, upward tending all though weak.

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" I did not see this, I did not love enough to see this, and I failed.

" Therefore let men regard me, who rashly longed to know all for power's sake ; and regard Aprile, the poet, who rashly longed for the whole of love for beauty's sake —and regarding both, shape forth a third and better-tempered spirit, in whom beauty and knowledge, love and power, shall mingle into one, and lead Man up to God, in whom all these four are One. In God alone is the goal.

" Meanwhile I die in peace, secure of attainment. What I have failed in here I shall attain there. I have never, in my basest hours, ceased to aspire ; God will fulfil my aspiration :

If I stoop
Into a dark tremendous sea of cloud,
It is but for a time , I press God's lamp
Close to my breast ; its splendour, soon or late,
Will pierce the gloom : I shall emerge one day,
You understand me ? I have said enough ?

Aprile ! Hand in hand with you, Aprile ! "

And so he dies.

CHAPTER V

THE POET OF ART

THE theory of human life which Browning conceived, and which I attempted in the last chapter to explain out of *Pauline* and *Paracelsus*, underlies the poems which have to do with the arts. Browning as the poet of Art is as fascinating a subject as Browning the poet of Nature; even more so, for he directed of set purpose a great deal of his poetry to the various arts, especially to music and painting. Nor has he neglected to write about his own art. The lover in *Pauline* is a poet. *Paracelsus* and *Aprile* have both touched that art. *Sordello* is a poet, and so are many others in the poems. Moreover, he treats continually of himself as a poet, and of the many criticisms on his work.

All through this work on the arts, the theory of which we have written appears continuously. It emerges fully in the close of *Easter-Day*. It is carefully wrought into poems like *Abt Vogler* and *A Grammarian's Funeral*, in which the pursuit of grammar is conceived of as the pursuit of an art. It is introduced by the way in the midst of subjects belonging to the art of painting, as in *Old Pictures in Florence* and *Andrea del Sarto*. Finally, in those poems which represent in vivid colour and selected personalities special times and forms of art, the theory still appears, but momentarily, as a dyad

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might show her face in a wood to a poet passing by.²⁴ I shall be obliged then to touch again and again on this theory of his in discussing Browning as the poet of the arts. This is a repetition which cannot be helped, but for which I request the pardon of my readers.

The subject of the arts, from the time when Caliban "fell to make something" to the re-birth of naturalism in Florence, from the earliest music and poetry to the latest, interested Browning profoundly; and he speaks of them, not as a critic from the outside, but out of the soul of them, as an artist. He is, for example, the only poet of the nineteenth century till we come to Rossetti, who has celebrated painting and sculpture by the art of poetry, and Rossetti did not link these arts to human life and character with as much force and penetration as Browning. Morris, when he wrote poetry, did not care to write about the other arts, then schools or history. He liked to describe in verse the beautiful things of the past, but not to argue on their how and why. Nor did he ever turn in on himself as artist, and ask how he wrote poetry or how he built up a pattern. What he did as artist was to *make*, and when he had made one thing to make another. He ran along like Pheidippides to his goal, without halting for one instant to consider the methods of his running. And all his life long this was his way.²⁵

Rossetti described a picture in a sonnet with admirable skill, so admirable that we say to ourselves—"Give me the picture or the sonnet, not

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both. They blot out one another. But to describe a picture is not to write about art. The one place where he does go down to its means and soul is in his little prose masterpiece, *Hand and Soul*, in which we see the path, the goal, the passion, but not the power of art. But he never, in thought, got, like Browning, to the bottom-joy of it. He does not seem to see, as clearly as Browning saw, that the source of all art was love ; and that the expression of love in beautiful form was or ought to be accomplished with that exulting joy which is the natural child of self-forgetfulness. This story of Rossetti's was in prose. In poetry, Rossetti, save in description from the outside, left art alone ; and Browning's special work on art, and particularly his poetic studies of it, are isolated in English poetry, and separate him from other poets.

I cannot wish that he had thought less and written less about other arts than poetry. But I do wish he had given more time and trouble to his own art, that we might have had clearer and lovelier poetry. Perhaps, if he had developed himself with more care as an artist in his own art, he would not have troubled himself or his art by so much devotion to abstract thinking and intellectual analysis. A strange preference also for naked facts sometimes beset him, as if men wanted these from a poet. It was as if some scientific demon entered into him for a time and turned poetry out, till Browning got weary of his guest and threw him out of the window. These reversions to some far

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off Browning in the past, who was deceived into thinking the intellect the king of life, enfeebled and sometimes destroyed the artist in him; and though he escaped for the best part of his poetry from this position, it was not seldom in his later years as a brand plucked from the burning. Moreover, he recognised this tendency in himself; and protested against it, sometimes humourously, sometimes seriously. At least so I read what he means in a number of poems, when he turns, after an over-wrought piece of analysis, upon himself and bursts out of his cobwebs into a solution of the question by passion and imagination. Nevertheless the charm of this merely intellectual play pulled at him continually, and as he could always embroider it with fancy it seemed to him close to imagination; and this belief grew upon him as he got farther away from the warmth and natural truth of youth. It is the melancholy tendency of some artists, as they feel the weakness of decay, to become scientific; and a fatal temptation it is. There is one poem of his in which he puts the whole matter clearly and happily, with a curious and suggestive title, "*Transcendentalism: A Poem in Twelve Books.*"

He speaks to a young poet who will give to men "naked thought, good, true, treasureable stuff, solid matter, without imaginative imagery, without emotion."

Thought's what they mean by verse, and seek in verse.
Boys seek for images and melody,
Men must have reason—so, you aim at men.

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It is "quite otherwise," Browning tells him, and he illustrates the matter by a story.

Jacob Böhme did not care for plants. All he cared for was his mysticism. But one day, as if the magic of poetry had slipped into his soul, he heard all the plants talking, and talking to him; and behold, he loved them and knew what they meant. Imagination had done more for him than all his metaphysics. So we give up our days to collating theory with theory, criticising, philosophising, till, one morning, we wake "and find life's summer past."

What remedy? What hope? Why, a brace of rhymes! And then, in life, that miracle takes place, which John of Halberstadt did by his magic. We feel like a child; the world is new; every bit of life is run over and enchanted by the wild rose.

And in there breaks the sudden rose herself,
Over us, under, round us on every side,
Nay, in and out the tables and the chairs
And musty volumes, Boehme's book and all—
Buries us with a glory, young once more,
Pouring heaven into this shut house of life.

So come, the harp back to your heart again!

I return, after this introduction, to Browning's doctrine of life as it is connected with the arts. It appears with great clearness in *Easter-Day*. He tells of an experience he had when, one night, musing on life, and wondering how it would be with him were he to die and be judged in a moment, he walked on the wild common outside the little Dissenting Chapel he had previously visited on

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Christmas-Eve and thought of the Judgment. And Common-sense said : " You have done your best ; do not be dismayed ; you will only be surprised, and when the shock is over you will smile at your fear." And as he thought thus the whole sky became a sea of fire. A fierce and vindictive scribble of red quick flame ran across it, and the universe was burned away. " And I knew," thought Browning, " now that Judgment had come, that I had chosen this world, its beauty, its knowledge, its good—that, though I often looked above, yet to renounce utterly the beauty of this earth and man was too hard for me." And a voice came : " Eternity is here, and thou art judged." And then Christ stood before him and said : " Thou hast preferred the finite when the infinite was in thy power. Earthly joys were palpable and tainted. The heavenly joys flitted before thee, faint, and rare, and taintless. Thou hast chosen those of this world. They are thine."

" O rapture ! is this the Judgment ? Earth's exquisite treasures of wonder and delight for me !"

" So soon made happy," said the voice. " The loveliness of earth is but like one rose flung from the Eden whence thy choice has excluded thee. The wonders of earth are but the tapestry of the ante-chamber in the royal house, thou hast abandoned."

All partial beauty was a pledge
Of beauty in its plenitude :
But since the pledge sufficed thy mood,
Retain it ! plenitude be theirs
Who looked above !

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"O sharp despair ! but since the joys of earth fail me, I take art. Art gives more to nature ; it stamps it with man. I'll take the Greek sculpture, the perfect painting of Italy—that world is mine !"

"Then obtain it," said the voice : "the one abstract form, the one face with its one look—all they could manage. Shall I, the illimitable beauty be judged by these single forms ? What of that perfection in their souls these artists were conscious of, inconceivably exceeding all they did ? What of their failure which told them an illimitable beauty was before them ? What of Michael Angelo now, who did not choose the world's success or earth's perfection and who now is on the breast of the Divine ? All the beauty of art is but furniture for life's first stage. Take it then. But there are those, my saints, who were not content, like thee, with earth's scrap of beauty, but desired the whole. They are now filled with it. Take thy one jewel of beauty on the beach ; lose all I had for thee in boundless ocean."

"Then I take mind ; earth's knowledge carries me beyond the finite. Through circling sciences, philosophies and histories I will spin with rapture ; and if these fail to aspire, I will fly to verse, and in its dew and fire break the chain which binds me to the earth ;—Nay, answer me not, I know what Thou wilt say : What is highest in knowledge—even those fine intuitions which lead the finite into the infinite—and which are best put in noble verse, are but gleams of a light beyond them, sparks from the

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sum of the whole I give that world up also, and I take Love All I ask is leave to love.'

"Ah," said the voice, "is this thy final choice? 'Love is the best', 'tis somewhat late. Yet all the power and beauty, nature and art and knowledge of this earth, were only worth because of love Through them infinite love called to thee; and even now thou clingest to earth's love as all. It is precious, but it exists to bear thee beyond the love of earth into the boundless love of God in me." At last, beaten to his last fortress, all broken down, he cries

Thou Love of God! Or let me die
Or grant what hell seem heaven almost
Let me not know that all is lost
Thou hast it by I woe me not to find
To this despair this corpse-like bird!
Let that old life seem mine no more —
With limitation is before
With darkness hunger toil distress,
Be all the earth a wilderness!
Only let me go on go on
Still hoping ever and anon
To reach one eve the Better Land!

This is put more strongly, as in the line "Be all the earth a wilderness!" than Browning himself would have put it. But he is in the passion of the man who speaks, and heightens the main truth into an extreme. But the theory is there, and it is especially applied to the love of beauty and therefore to the arts. The illustrations are taken from music and painting; from sculpture and poetry. Only in dwelling too exclusively, as perhaps the situation demands, on the renunciation

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of this world's successes, he has left out that part of his theory which demands that we should, accepting our limits, work within them for the love of man, but learn from their pressure and pain to transcend them always in the desire of infinite perfection. In *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, a masterpiece of argumentative and imaginative passion—such a poem as only Browning could have written, who, more than other poets, equalised, when most inspired, reasoning, emotions and intuitions into one material for poetry—he applies this view of his to the whole of man's life here and in the world to come; when the Rabbi in the quiet of old age considers what his life has been, and how God has wrought him through it for eternity. But I leave that poem which has nothing to do with art, for *Abt Vogler* which is dedicated to music.

“When Solomon pronounced the Name of God, all the spirits, good and bad, assembled to do his will and build his palace. And when I, Abt Vogler, touched the keys, I called the Spirits of Sound to me, and they have built my palace of music; and to inhabit it all the Great Dead came back, till in the vision I made a perfect music. Nay, for a moment, I touched in it the infinite perfection; but now it is gone; I cannot bring it back. Had I painted it, had I written it, I might have explained it. But in music, out of the sounds something emerges which is above the sounds, and that ineffable thing I touched and lost. I took the well-known sounds of earth, and out of them came a fourth sound, nay, not a sound—but a star,

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This was a flash of God's will which opened the Eternal to me for a moment ; and I shall find it again in the eternal life. Therefore, from the achievement of earth and the failure of it, I turn to God, and in him I see that every image, thought, impulse, and dream of knowledge or of beauty—which, coming whence we know not, flit before us in human life, breathe for a moment, and then depart ; which, like my music, build a sudden palace in imagination ; which abide for an instant and dissolve, but which memory and hope retain as a ground of aspiration—are not lost to us though they seem to die in their immediate passage. Their music has its home in the Will of God and we shall find them completed there.

All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good shall exist ;
Not its semblance, but itself ; no beauty, nor good, nor
power

Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives for the
melodist

When eternity affirms the conception of an hour.
The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth too
hard,

The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the sky,
Are music sent up to God by the lover and the bard ;

Enough that he heard it once: we shall hear it by-and-by.

Well, it is earth with me ; silence resumes her reign :

I will be patient and proud, and soberly acquiesce.

Give me the keys. I feel for the common chord again,

Sliding by semitones, till I sink to the minor,—yes,
And I blunt it into a ninth, and I stand on alien ground,
Surveying awhile the heights, I rolled from into the
deep ;

Which, hark, I have dared and done, for my resting-place
is found,

The C. Major of this life ; so, now I will try to sleep.

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With that he returns to human life, content to labour in its limits—the common chord is his. But he has been where he shall be, and he is not likely to be satisfied with the C major of life. This, in Browning's thought, is the true comfort and strength of the life of the artist, to whom these fallings from us, vanishings, these transient visits of the infinite Divine, like swallows that pass in full flight, are more common than to other men. They tell him of the unspeakable beauty; they let loose his spirit to fly into the thud heaven.

So much for the theory in this poem. As to the artist and his art in it, that is quite a different matter, and as there are few of Browning's poems which reach a higher level than this both in form, thought, and spiritual passion, it may be worth while, for once, to examine a poem of his at large.

Browning's imagination conceived in a moment the musician's experience from end to end; and the form of the experience arose along with the conception. He saw Abt Vogler in the silent church, playing to himself before the golden towers of the organ, and slipping with sudden surprise into a strain which is less his than God's. He saw the vision which accompanied the music and the man's heart set face to face with the palace of music he had built. He saw him live in it and then pass to heaven with it and lose it. And he saw the close of the experience, with all its scenery in the church, and in Abt Vogler's heart at the same time, in one vision. In this unconscious shaping of his thought into a human incident, with its soul and

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scenery, is the imagination creating, like a god, a thing unknown, unseen before.

Having thus shaped the form, the imagination passed on to make the ornament. It creates that far-of image of Solomon and his spirits building their palace for the Queen of Sheba which exalts the whole conception and enlarges the reader's imagination through all the legends of the great King—and then it makes, for fresh adornment, the splendid piling up of the sounds into walls of gold, pinacles, splendours and meteor moons ; and lastly, with upward sweeping of its wings, bids the sky to fall in love with the glory of the palace, and the mighty forms of the noble Dead to walk in it. This is the imagination at play with its conception, adorning, glorifying, heightening the full impression, but keeping every imaged ornament misty, impalpable, as in a dream—for so the conception demanded.

And then, to fill the conception with the spirit of humanity, the personal passion of the poet rises and falls through the description, as the music rises and falls. We feel his breast beating against ours ; till the time comes when, like a sudden change in a great song, his emotion changes into ecstasy in the outburst of the 9th verse :

Therefore to whom turn I but to thee, the ineffable Name ?

It almost brings tears into the eyes. This is ~~art-creation~~—this is what imagination, intense emotion, and individuality have made of the material of thought—poetry, not prose.

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Even at the close, the conception, the imagination, and the personal passion keep their art. The rush upwards of the imaginative feeling dies slowly away ; it is as evanescent as the Vision of the Palace, but it dies into another picture of humanity which even more deeply engages the human heart. Browning sees the organ-loft now silent and dark, and the silent figure in it, alone and bowed over the keys. The church is still, but aware of what has been. The golden pipes of the organ are lost in the twilight and the music is over—all the double vision of the third heaven into which he has been caught has vanished away. The form of the thing rightly fits the idea. Then, when the form is shaped, the poet fills it with the deep emotion of the musician's soul, and then with his own emotion ; and close as the air to the earth are the sorrow and exultation of Abt Vogler and Browning in the human heart—sorrow for the vanishing and the failure, exultant joy because what has been is but an image of the infinite beauty they will have in God. In the joy they do not sorrow for the failure. It is nothing but an omen of success. Their soul, greater than the vision, takes up common life with patience and silent hope. We hear them sigh and strike the chord of C. •

This is lyric imagination at work in lyric poetry. There are two kinds of lyrics among many others. One is where the strong emotion of the poet, fusing all his materials into one creation, comes to a height and then breaks off suddenly. It is like

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a thunderstorm, which, doubling and redoubling its flash and roar, ends in the zenith with the brightest flash and loudest clang of thunder. There is another kind. It is when the storm of emotion reaches, like the first, its climax, but does not end with it. The lyric passion dies slowly away from the zenith to the horizon, and ends in quietude and beauty, attended by soft colour and gentle sounds; like the thunderstorm which faints with the sunset and gathers its clouds to be adorned with beauty. This lyric of Browning's is a noble example of the second type.

I take another poem, the *Grammarians's Funeral*, to illustrate his art. The main matter of thought in it is the same as that of *Abt Vogler*, with the variation that the central figure is not a musician but a grammarian; that what he pursued was critical knowledge, not beauty, and that he is not a modern, like Abt Vogler, but one of the Renaissance folk, and seized, as men were seized then, with that insatiable curiosity which characterised the outbreak of the New Learning. The matter of thought in it is of less interest to us than the poetic creation wrought out of it, or than the art with which it is done. We see the form into which the imaginative conception is thrown—the group of sorrowing students carrying their master's corpse to the high platform of the mountain, singing what he was, in admiration and honour and delight that he had mastered life and won eternity; a conception full of humanity, as full of the life of the dead master's soul as of the

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students' enthusiasm. This thrills us into creation, with the poet, as we read. Then the imagination which has made the conception into form adorns it. It creates the plain, the encircling mountains, one cloudy peak higher than the rest ; as we mount we look on the plain below ; we reach the city on the hill, pass it, and climb the hill-top ; there are all the high-flying birds, the meteors, the lightnings, the thickest dew. And we lay our dead on the peak, above the plain. This is the scenery, the imaginative ornament, and all through it we are made to hear the chant of the students ; and so lifting is the melody of the verse we seem to taste the air, fresher and fresher as we climb. Then, finally, into the midst of this flows for us the eager intensity of the scholar. Dead as he is, we feel him to be alive ; never resting, pushing on incessantly, beating failure beneath his feet, making it the step for further search for the infinite, resolute to live in the dull limits of the present work, but never content save in waiting for that eternity which will fulfil the failure of earth ; which, missing earth's success, throws itself on God, dying to gain the highest. This is the passion of the poem, and Browning is it like a fire. It was his own, his very life. He pours it into the students who rejoice in the death of their master, and he gives it to us as we read the poem. And then, because conception, imagination, and intensity of thought and emotion all here work together, as in *Abt Vogler*, the melody of the poem is lovely, save in one verse which ought to be out

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of the poem. As to the conclusion, it is priceless. Such a conclusion can only emerge when all that precedes it finely contains it, and I have often thought that it pictures Browning himself. I wish he had been buried on a mountain top, all Italy below him.

Well here's the platform, here's the proper place :

Hail to your perches,
All ye high-flyers of the feathered race,
Swallows and curlews !
Here's the top peak, the multitude below
Live, for they can, there -
This man decided not to Live but Know—
Bury this man there ?

Here—here's his place, where meteors shoot, clouds form
Lightnings are loosened.

Stars come and go ! Let joy break with the storm,
Peace let the dew send !

Lofty designs must close in like effects .

Loftily lying,
Leave him still loftier than the world suspects,
Living and dying

This is the artist at work, and I doubt whether all the laborious prose written, in history and criticism, on the revival of learning, will ever express better than this short poem the inexhaustible thirst of the Renaissance in its pursuit of knowledge, or the enthusiasm of the pupils of a New Scholar for his desperate strife to know in a short life the very centre of the Universe.

Another poem on the arts which is mixed up with Browning's theory of life, is *Andrea del Sarto*. Into it the theory slips, like an uninvited guest into a dinner-party of whom it is felt that he has some

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relation to some one of the guests, but for whom no cover is laid. The faulty and broken life of Andrea, in its contrast with his flawless drawing, has been a favourite subject with poets. Alfred de Musset and others have dramatised it, and it seems strange that none of our soul-wrecking and vivisectioning novelists have taken it up for their amusement. Browning has not left out a single point of the subject. The only criticism I should make of this admirable poem is that, when we come to the end, we dislike the woman and despise the man more than we pity either, of them; and in tragic art-work of a fine quality, pity for human nature with a far-off tenderness in it should remain as the most lasting impression. All the greater artists, even while they went to the bottom of sorrow and wickedness, have done this wise and beautiful thing, and Browning rarely omits it.

The first art-matter in the poem is Browning's sketch of the sudden genesis of a picture. Andrea is sitting with his wife on the window-seat looking out to Ficsole. As he talks she smiles a weary, lovely, autumn smile, and, born in that instant and of her smile, he sees his picture, knows its atmosphere, realises its tone of colour, feels its prevailing sentiment. How he will execute it is another question, and depends on other things; but no better sketch could be given of the sudden spiritual fashion in which great pictures are generated. Here are the lines, and they also strike the keynote of Andrea's soul—that to which his life has brought him.

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You smile ? why, there's my picture ready made,
There's what we painters call our harmony !
A common greyness silvers everything,—
All in a twilight, you and I alike—
You, at the point of your first pride in me
(That's gone, you know).—but I, at every point ;
My youth, my hope, my art, being all toned down
To yonder sober pleasant Fiesole.
There's the bell clinking from the chapel-top ;
That length of convent-wall across the way
Holds the trees safer, huddled more inside ;
The last monk leaves the garden ; days decrease,
And autumn grows, autumn in everything.
Eh ? the whole seems to fall into a shape
As if I saw alike my work and self
And all that I was born to be and do,
A twilight piece Love, we are in God's hand.

In God's hand ? Yes, but why being free are
we so fettered ? And here slips in the unbidden
guest of the theory. Andrea has chosen earthly
love ; Lucrezia is all in all ; and he has reached
absolute perfection in drawing—

I do what many dream of, all their lives.

He can reach out beyond himself no more. He
has got the earth, lost the heaven. He makes no
error, and has, therefore, no impassioned desire
which, flaming through the faulty picture, makes it
greater art than his faultless work. " The soul is
gone from me, that vexed, suddenly-impassioned,
upward-rushing thing, with its play, insight,
broken sorrows, sudden joys, pursuing, discontented
life. " Other men reach a heaven shut out from me,
though they cannot draw like me. No praise or
blame affects me. I know my handiwork is

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perfect. But there burns a truer light of God in them. Lucrezia, I am judged." •

Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
Or what's a heaven for? All is silver-grey
Placid and perfect with my art :—the worse

"Here," he says, "is a piece of Rafael. The arm is out of drawing, and I could make it right. But the passion, the soul of the thing is not in me. Had you, my love, but urged me upward, to glory and God, I might have been uncontent; I might have done it for you. No," and again he sweeps round on himself, out of his excuses, "perhaps not, 'incentives come from the soul's self'; and mine is gone. I've chosen the love of you, Lucrezia, earth's love, and I cannot pass beyond my faultless drawing into the strife to paint those divine imaginations the soul conceives."

That is the meaning of Browning. The faultless, almost mechanical art, the art which might be born of an adulterous connection between science and art, is of little value to men. Not in the flawless painter is true art found, but in those who painted inadequately, yet whose pictures breathe

•
Infinite passion and the pain,
Of finite hearts that yearn.

•
In this incessant strife to create new worlds and in their creation, which always ending in partial failure forces fresh effort—is, Browning might have said, the excuse for God having deliberately made us defective. Had we been made good, had

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we no strife with evil ; had we the power to embody at once the beauty we are capable of seeing ; could we have laid our hand on truth, and grasped her without the desperate struggle we have to win one fruit from her tree ; had we had no strong crying and tears, no agony against wrong, against our own passions and their work, against false views of things — we might have been angels ; but we should not have had Humanity and all its wild history, and all its work . we should not have had that which, for all I know, may be unique in the universe , no, nor any of the great results of the battle and its misery. Had it not been for the defectiveness, the sin and pain, we should have had nothing of the interest of the long evolution of science, law and government, of the chain of discovery, of pursuit, of the slow upbuilding of moral right, of the vast variety of philosophy. Above all, we should have had none of the great art men love so well, no *Odyssey*, *Divine Comedy*, no *Hamlet*, no *Edipus*, no Handel, no Beethoven, no painting or sculpture where the love and sorrow of the soul breathe in canvas, fresco, marble and bronze, no, nor any of the great and loving lives who suffered and overcame, from Christ to the poor woman who dies for love in a London lane. All these are made through the struggle, and the sorrow. We should not have had, I repeat, humanity ; and provided no soul perishes for ever but lives to find union with undying love, the game, with all its terrible sorrow, pays for the candle. We may find out, some day, that the

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existence and work of humanity, crucified as it has been, are of untold interest and use to the universe—which things the angels desire to look into. If Browning had listened to that view, he would, I think, have accepted it.

Old Pictures in Florence touches another side of his theory. In itself, it is one of Browning's half-humourous poems; a pleasantly-composed piece, glancing here and glancing there, as a man's mind does when leaning over a hill-villa's parapet on a sunny morning in Florence. I have elsewhere quoted its beginning. It is a fine example of his nature-poetry—it creates the scenery and atmosphere of the poem, and the four lines with which the fourth verse closes sketch what Browning thought to be one of his poetic gifts—

And mark through the winter afternoons
By a gift God grants me now and then
In the mild decline of those suns like moons,
Who walked in Florence besides her men

This, then, is a poem of many moods, beginning with Giotto's Tower, then wondering why Giotto did not tell the poet who loved him so much that one of his pictures was lying hidden in a shop where some one else picked it up; then, thinking of all Giotto's followers, whose ghosts he imagines are wandering through Florence, sorrowing for the decay of their pictures.

"But at least they have escaped, and have their holiday in heaven, and do not care one straw for our praise or blame." They did their work, they and the great masters. We call them old Masters

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but they were new in their time ; their old Masters were the Greeks. They broke away from the Greeks and revolutionised art into a new life. In our turn we must break away from them."

And now glides in the theory. " When Greek art reached its perfection, the limbs which infer the soul, and enough of the soul to inform the limbs, were faultlessly represented. Men said the best had been done, and aspiration and growth in art ceased. Content with what had been done, men imitated but did not create. But man cannot remain without change in a past perfection ; for then he remains in a kind of death. Even with failure, with faulty work, he desires to make new things, and in making, to be alive and feel his life. Therefore Giotto and the rest began to create a fresh aspect of humanity, which, however imperfect in form, would suggest an infinite perfection. The Greek perfection ties us down to earth, to a few forms, and the sooner, if it forbid us to go on, we reject its ideal as the only one, the better for art and for mankind.

'Tis a life-long toil till our lump be leaven—

The better ! What's come to perfection perishes.

Things learned on earth, we shall practise in heaven :

Works done least rapidly, Art most cherishes.

" The great Campanile is still unfinished ; " so he shapes his thoughts into his scenery. Shall man be satisfied in art with the crystallised joy of Apollo, or the petrified grief of Niobe, when there are a million more expressions of joy and grief to

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render? In that way felt Giotto and his crew. "We will paint the whole of man," they cried, "paint his new hopes and joys and pains, and never pause, because we shall never quite succeed. We will paint the soul in all its infinite variety—bring the invisible full into play. Of course we shall miss perfection—who can get side by side with infinitude?—but we shall grow out of the dead perfection of the past, and live and move, and have our being.

Let the visible go to the dogs—what matters?"

Thus art began again. Its spring-time came, dim and dewy; and the world rejoiced.

And that is what has happened again and again in the history of art. Browning has painted a universal truth. It was that which took place when Wordsworth, throwing away the traditions of a century and all the finished perfection, as men thought, of the Augustan age, determined to write of man as man, whatever the issue; to live with the infinite variety of human nature, and in its natural simplicities. What we shall see, he thought, may be faulty, common, unideal, imperfect. What we shall write will not have the conventional perfection of Pope and Gray, which all the cultivated world admires, and in which it rests content—growth and movement dead—but it will be true, natural, alive, running onwards to a far-off goal. And we who write—our loins are accinct, our lights burning, as men waiting for the revelation of the Bridegroom. Wordsworth brought

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back the soul to Poetry. She made her failures, but she was alive. Spring was blossoming around her with dew and living airs, and the infinite opened before her.

So, too, it was when Turner recreated landscape art. There was the perfect Claudesque landscape, with all its parts arranged, its colours chosen, the composition balanced, the tree here, the river there, the figures in the foreground, the accurate distribution and gradation of the masses of light and shade. "There," the critics said, "we have had perfection. Let us rest in that." And all growth in landscape-art ceased. Then came Turner, who, when he had followed the old for a time and got its good, broke away from it, as if in laughter. "What," he felt, "the infinite of nature is before me; inconceivable change and variety in earth, and sky, and sea—and shall I be tied down to one form of painting landscape, one arrangement of artistic properties? Let the old perfection go." And we had our revolution in landscape art—nothing, perhaps, so faultless as Claude's composition, but life, love of nature, and an illimitable range, incessant change, movement, and aspiration which have never since allowed the landscape artist to think that he has attained.

On another side of the art of painting, Rossetti, Millais, Hunt arose; and they said, "We will paint men as they actually were in the past, in the moments of their passion, and with their emotions on their faces; and with the scenery around them as it was; and whatever background of nature

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there was behind them, it shall be painted direct from the very work of nature herself, and in her very colours. In doing this our range will become infinite. No doubt we shall fail. We cannot grasp the whole of nature and humanity, but we shall be *in* their life : aspiring, alive, and winning more and more of truth." And the world of art howled at them, as the world of criticism howled at Wordsworth. But a new life and joy began to move in painting. Its winter was over, its spring had begun, its summer was imagined. Their drawing was faulty ; their colour was called crude ; they seemed to know little or nothing of composition ; but the Spirit of Life was in them, and their faults were worth more than the best successes of the school that followed Rafael ; for their faults proved that passion, aspiration and originality were again alive :

Give these, I exhort you, their guerdon and glory
For daring so much, before they well did it

If ever the artist should say to himself, " What I desire has been attained : I can but imitate or follow it " ; or if the people who care for any art should think, " The best has been reached : let us be content to rest in that perfection ; the death of art has come.

The next poem belonging to this subject is the second part of *Pippa Passes*. What concerns us here is that Jules, the French artist, loves Phœbe ; and on his return from his marriage pours out his soul to her concerning his art.

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In his work, in his pursuit of beauty through his aspiration to the old Greek ideal, he has found his full content—his heaven upon earth. But now, living love of a woman has stolen it. How can he now, he asks, pursue that old ideal when he has the real? how carve Tydeus, with her about the room? He is disturbed, thrilled, discontent. A new ideal rises. How can he now

Bid each conception stand while, trait by trait,
My hand transfers its lineament, to stone?
Will my mere fancies live near you, their truth—
The live truth, passing and repassing me
Sitting beside me?

Before he had seen her, all the varied stuff of Nature, every material in her workshop, tended to one form of beauty, to the human archetype. But now she, Phene, represents the archetype; and though Browning does not express this, we feel that if Jules continue in that opinion, his art will die. Then, carried away by his enthusiasm for his art, he passes, through a statement that nature suggests in all her doings man and his life and his beauty—a statement Browning himself makes in *Paracelsus*—to a description of the capabilities of various stuffs in nature under the sculptor's hand, and especially, of marble as having in it the capabilities of all the other stuffs and also something more—a living spirit in itself which aids the sculptor, and even does some of his work.

This is a subtle thought peculiarly characteristic of Browning's thinking about painting, music,

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poetry, or sculpture. I believe he felt, and if he did not, it is still true, that the vehicle of any art brought something out of itself into the work of the artist. Abt Vogler feels this as he plays on the instrument he made. Any musician who plays on two instruments knows that the distinct instrument does distinct work, and loves each instrument for its own spirit; because each makes his art, expressed in it, different from his art expressed in another. Even the same art-creation is different in two instruments: the vehicle does its own part of the work. Any painter will say the same, according as he works in fresco or on canvas, in water-colour or in oil. Even a material like charcoal makes him work the same conception in a different way. I will quote the passage; it goes to the root of the matter; and whenever I read it, I seem to hear a well-known sculptor as he talked one night to me of the spiritual way in which marble, so soft and yet so firm, answered like living material to his tool, sending flame into it, and then seemed, as with a voice, to welcome the emotion which, flowing from him through the chisel, passed into the stone.

But of the stuffs one can be master of,
How I divined their capabilities!
From the soft-rinded smoothening-facile chalk
That yields your outline to the air's embrace,
Half-softened by a halo's pearly gloom:
Down to the crisp imperious steel, so sure
To cut its one confided thought clean out
Of all the world. But marble!—'neath my tools
More pliable than jelly—as it were
Some clear primordial creature dug from depths

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In the earth's heart, where itself breeds itself,
And whence all baser substance may be worked ;
Refine it off to air, you may—condense it
Down to the diamond,—is not metal there,
When o'er the sudden speck my chisel trips ?
—Not flesh as flake off flake I scale, approach,
Lay bare those bluish veins of blood asleep ?
Lurks flame in no strange windings where surprised
By the swift implement sent home at once,
Flushes and glowings radiate and hover
About its track ?

But Jules finds that Phene, whom he has been deceived into believing an intelligence equal to his own, does not understand one word he has said, is nothing but an uneducated girl ; and his dream of perfection in the marriage of Art and Love vanishes away, and with the deception the aims and hopes of his art as it has been. And Browning makes this happen of set purpose, in order that, having lost satisfaction in his art-ideal, and then his satisfaction in that ideal realised in a woman—having failed in Art and Love—he may pass on into a higher aim, with a higher conception, both of art and love, and make a new world, in the woman and in the art. He is about to accept the failure, to take only to revenge on his deceivers, when Pippa sings as she is passing, and the song touches him into finer issues of thought. He sees that Phene's soul is, like a butterfly, half-loosed from its chrysalis, and ready for flight. The sight and song awake a truer love, for as yet he had loved Phene only through his art. Now he is impassioned with pity for a human soul, and his first new sculpture will be the creation of her soul.

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Shall to produce form out of unshaped stuff
Be Art—and further, to evoke a soul
From form be nothing? This new soul is mine!

At last, he is borne into self-forgetfulness by love, and finds a man's salvation. And in that loss of self he drinks of the deep fountain of art. Aprile found that out. Sordello dies as he discovers it, and Jules, the moment he has touched its waters with his lip, sees a new realm of art arise, and loves it with such joy that he knows he will have power to dwell in his heart, and create from its joy.

One may do whate'er one likes
In Art; the only thing is, to make sure
That one does like it—which takes pains to know.

He breaks all his models up. They are paltry, dead things belonging to a dead past. "I begin," he cries, "art afresh, in a fresh world,

Some unsuspected isle in far-off seas."

The ideal that fails means the birth of a new ideal. The very centre of Browning as an artist is there:

Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,
Sleep to wake!

Sordello is another example of his theory, of a different type from Aprile, or that poet in *Pauline* who gave Browning the sketch from which Sordello was conceived. But Browning, who, as I have said, repeated his theory, never repeated his examples: and Sordello is not only clearly varied from Aprile and the person in *Pauline*, but the

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variations themselves are inventively varied. The complex temperament of Sordello incessantly alters its form, not only as he grows from youth to manhood, but as circumstances meet him. They give him a shock, as a slight blow does to a kaleidoscope, and the whole pattern of his mind changes. But as with the bits of coloured glass in the kaleidoscope, the elements of Sordello's mind remain the same. It is only towards the end of his career, on the forcible introduction into his life of new elements from the outward world, that his character radically changes, and his soul is born. He wins that which he has been without from the beginning. He wins, as we should say, a heart. He not only begins to love Palma otherwise than in his dreams, but the love of man arises with that love—for, in characters like Sordello, personal love, once really stirred, is sure to expand beyond itself—and then, following on the love of man, conscience is quickened into life, and for the first time recognises itself and its duties. In this new light of love and conscience, directed towards humanity, he looks back on his life as an artist, or rather, Browning means us to do so; and we understand that he has done nothing worthy in his art; and that even his gift of imagination has been without the fire of true passion. His aspirations, his phantasies, his songs, done only for his own sake, have been cold, and left the world cold.

He has aspired to a life in the realm of pure imagination, to winning by imagination alone all knowledge and all love, and the power over men

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which flows from these. He is, in this aspiration, Paracelsus and Aprile in one. But he has neither the sincerity of Paracelsus nor the passion of Aprile. He lives in himself alone, beyond the world of experience, and only not conscious of those barriers which limit our life on which Browning dwells so much, because he does not bring his aspirations or his imaginative work to the test by shaping them outside of himself. He fails, that is, to create anything which will please or endure ; fails in the first aim, the first duty of an artist. He comes again and again to the verge of creating something which may give delight to men, but only once succeeds, when by chance, in a moment of excited impulse, caused partly by his own vanity, and partly by the waves of humanity at Palma's *Court of Love* beating on his soul, he breaks for a passing hour into the song which conquers Eglamor. When, at the end, he does try to shape himself for men, outside of himself, he is too late for this life. He dies of the long struggle, of the revelation of his failure and the reasons of it, of the supreme light which falls on his wasted life ; and yet not wasted, since even in death he has found his soul and all it means. His imagination, formerly only intellectual, has become emotional as well ; he loves mankind, and sacrifices fame, power, and knowledge to its welfare. He no longer thinks to avoid, by lying only in himself, the baffling limitations which inevitably trouble human life ; but now desires, working within these limits, to fix his eyes on the ineffable Love ; failing but

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making every failure a ladder on which to climb to higher things. Thus —the true way of life—he finds out as he dies. To have that spirit, and to work in it, is the very life of art. To pass for ever out of and beyond one's self is to the artist the lesson of Sordello's story.

It is hardly learnt. The self in Sordello, the self of imagination, unwarmed by love of men, is driven out of the artist with strange miseries, battles and despairs, and these Browning describes with such inventiveness that at the last one is inclined to say, with all the pitiful irony of Christ, "This kind goeth not forth but with prayer and fasting."

The position in the poem is at root the same as that in Tennyson's *Palace of Art*. These two poets found, about the same time, the same idea, and, independently, shaped it into poems. Tennyson put it into the form of a vision, the defect of which was that it was too far removed from common experience. Browning put it into the story of a man's life. Tennyson expressed it with extraordinary clearness, simplicity, and with a wealth of lovely ornament, so rich that it somewhat overwhelmed the main lines of his conception. Browning expressed it with extraordinary complexity, subtlety, and obscurity of diction. But when we take the trouble of getting to the bottom of *Sordello*, we find ourselves where we do not find ourselves in *The Palace of Art*—we find ourselves in close touch and friendship with a man, living with him, sympathising with him, pitying him, blessing him, angry and delighted with him,

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amazingly interested in his labyrinthine way of thinking and feeling ; we follow with keen interest his education, we see a soul in progress ; we wonder what he will do next, what strange turn we shall come to in his mind, what new effort he will make to realise himself ; and, loving him right through from his childhood to his death, we are quite satisfied when he dies. At the back of this, and complicating it still more—but, when we arrive at seeing it clearly, increasing the interest of the poem—is a great to-and-fro of humanity at a time when humanity was alive and keen and full of attempting ; when men were savagely original, when life was lived to its last drop, and when a new world was dawning. Of all this outside humanity there is not a trace in Tennyson, and Browning could not have got on without it. Of course, it made his poetry difficult. We cannot get excellences without their attendant defects. We have a great deal to forgive in *Sordello*. But for the sake of the vivid humanity we forgive it all.

Sordello begins as a boy, living alone in a castle near Mantua, built in a gorge of the low hills, and the description of the scenery of the castle, without and within, is one example of the fine ornament of which *Sordello* is so full. There, this rich and fertile nature lives, fit to receive delight at every sense, fit to shape what is received into imaginative pictures within, but not without ; content with the contemplation of his own imaginings. At first it is Nature from whom *Sordello* receives impressions, and he amuses himself with the fancies he draws

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from her. But he never shapes his emotion into actual song: Then tired of Nature, he dreams himself into the skin and soul of all the great men of whom he has read. He becomes them in himself, as Pauline's lover has done before him; but one by one they fade into unreality—for he knows nothing of men—and the last projection of himself into Apollo, the Lord of Poetry, is the most unreal of them all: at which fantasy all the woods and streams and sunshine round Gorto are infinitely amused. Thus, when he wants sympathy, he does not go down to Mantua and make song for the crowd of men; he invents in dreams a host of sympathisers, all of whom are but himself in other forms. Even when he aims at perfection, and, making himself Apollo, longs for a Daphne to double his life, his soul is still such stuff as dreams are made of, till he wakes one morning to ask himself: "When will this dream be truth?"

This is the artist's temperament in youth when he is not possessed of the greater qualities of genius—his imaginative visions, his aspirations, his pride in apartness from men, his self-contentment, his sloth, the presence in him of barren imagination, the absence from it of the spiritual, nothing in him which as yet desires, through the sorrow and strife of life, God's infinitude, or man's love; a natural life indeed, forgiveable, gay, sportive, dowered with happy self-love, good to pass through and enjoy, but better to leave behind. But Sordello will not become the actual artist till he lose his self-involvement and find his soul,

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not only in love of his Daphne but in love of man. And the first thing he will have to do is that which Sordello does not care to do—to embody before men in order to give them pleasure or impulse, to console or exalt them, some of the imaginations he has enjoyed within himself. Nor can Sordello's imagination reach true passion, for it ignores that which chiefly makes the artist, union with the passions of mankind. Only when near to death does he outgrow the boy of Goro, and then we find that he has ceased to be the artist. Thus, the poem is the history of the failure of a man with an artistic temperament to be an artist. Or rather, that is part of the story of the poem, and, as Browning was an artist himself, a part which is of the greatest interest.

Sordello, at the close of the first book, is wearied of dreams. Even in his solitude, the limits of life begin to oppress him. Time fleets, fate is tardy, life will be over before he lives. Then an accident helps him—

Which breaking on Sordello's mixed content
Opened like any flash that cures the blind
The veritable business of mankind

This accident is the theme of the second book. It belongs to the subject of this chapter, for it contrasts two types of the artist, Eglamor and Sordello, and it introduces Naddo, the critic, with a good knowledge of poetry, with a great deal of common sense, with an inevitable sliding into the opinion that what society has stamped must be

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good—a mixed personage, and a sketch done with Browning's humorous and pitying skill.

The contrast between Eglamor and Sordello runs through the whole poem. Sordello recalls Eglamor at the last, and Naddo appears again and again to give the worldly as well as the common-sense solution of the problems which Sordello makes for himself. Eglamor is the poet who has no genius, whom one touch of genius burns into nothing, but who, having a charming talent, employs it well; and who is so far the artist that what he feels he is able to shape gracefully, and to please mankind therewith; who, moreover loves, enjoys, and is wholly possessed with what he shapes in song. This is good; but then he is quite satisfied with what he does; he has no aspiration, and all the infinitude of beauty is lost to him. And when Sordello takes up his incomplete song, finishes it, inspires, expands what Eglamor thought perfect, he sees at last that he has only a graceful talent, that he has lived in a vain show, like a gnome in a cell of the rock of gold. Genius, momentarily realising itself in Sordello, reveals itself to Eglamor with all its infinites; Heaven and Earth and the universe open on Eglamor, and the revelation of what he is, and of the perfection beyond, kills him. That is a fine, true, and piteous sketch.

But Sordello, who is the man of possible genius, is not much better off. There has been one outbreak into reality at Palma's *Court of Love*. Every one, afterwards, urges him to sing. The critics gather round him. He makes poems, he becomes

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the accepted poet of Northern Italy. But he cannot give continuous delight to the world. His poems are not like his song before Palma. They have no true passion, being woven like a spider's web out of his own inside. His case then is more pitiable, his failure more complete, than Eglamor's. Eglamor could shape something; he had his own enjoyment, and he gave pleasure to men. Sordello, lured incessantly towards abstract ideals, lost in their contemplation, is smitten, like Aprile, into helplessness by the multitudinousness of the images he sees, refuses to descend into real life and submit to its limitations, is driven into the slothfulness of that dreaming imagination which is powerless to embody its images in the actual song. Sometimes he tries to express himself, longing for reality. When he tries he fails, and instead of making failure a step to higher effort, he falls back impatiently on himself, and is lost in himself. Moreover, he tries always within himself, and with himself for judge. He does not try the only thing which would help him—the submission of his work to the sympathy and judgment of men. Out of touch with any love save love of his own imaginings, he cannot receive those human impressions which kindle the artist into work, nor answer the cry which comes from mankind, with such eagerness, to genius—"Express for us in clear form that which we vaguely feel. Make us see and admire and love." Then he ceases even to love song, because, though he can imagine everything, he can do nothing; and deaf to the voices of men,

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he despises man. Finally he asks himself, like so many young poets who have followed his way, What is the judgment of the world worth? Nothing at all, he answers. With that ultimate folly, the favourite resort of minor poets, Sordello goes altogether wrong. He pleases nobody, not even himself, spends his time in arguing inside himself why he has not succeeded, and comes to no conclusion, except that total failure is the necessity of the world. At last one day, wandering from Mantua, he finds himself in his old environment, in the mountain cup where Goito and the castle lie. And the old dream, awakened by the old associations, that he was Apollo, Lord of Song, rushed back upon him and enwrapped him wholly. He feels, in the blessed silence, that he is no longer what he has been of late,

a pettish minstrel meant
To wear away his soul in discontent,
Brooding on fortune's malice,

but himself once more, freed from the world of Mantua, alone again, but in his loneliness really more lost than he was at Mantua, as we soon find out in the third book.

I return, in concluding this chapter, to the point which bears most clearly on Browning as the poet of art. The only time when Sordello realises what it is to be an artist is when, swept out of himself by the kindled emotion of the crowd at the *Court of Love* and inspired also by the true emotion of Eglamor's song, which has been made

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because he loved it—his imagination is impassioned enough to shape for man the thing within him, outside of himself, and to sing for the joy of singing—having forgotten himself in mankind, in their joy and in his own.

But it was little good to him. When he stole home to Goito in a dream, he sat down to think over the transport he had felt why he felt it, how he was better than Eglamor; and at last, having missed the whole use of the experience (which was to draw him into the service of man within the limits of life but to always transcend the limits in aspiration), he falls away from humanity into his own self again; and perfectly happy for the moment, but lost as an artist and a man, lies lazy, filleted and robed on the turf, with a lute beside him, looking over the landscape below the castle and fancying himself Apollo. This is to have the capacity to be an artist, but it is not to be an artist. And we leave Sordello lying on the grass enjoying himself, but not destined on that account to give any joy to man.

CHAPTER VI

SORDELLO

THE period in which the poem of *Sordello* opens is at the end of the first quarter of the thirteenth century, at the time when the Guelf cities allied themselves against the Ghibellines in Northern Italy. They formed the Lombard League, and took their private quarrels up into one great quarrel—that between the partisans of the Empire and those of the Pope. *Sordello* is then a young man of thirty years. He was born in 1194, when the fierce fight in the streets of Vicenza took place which Salinguerra describes, as he looks back on his life, in the fourth canto of this poem. The child is saved in that battle, and brought from Vicenza by Adelaide, the second wife of Ezzelino da Romano II.,* to Goito. He is really the son of Salinguerra and Retrude, a connection of Frederick II., but Adelaide conceals this, and brings him up as her page, alleging that he is the son of Elcorte, an archer. Palma (or Cunizza), Ezzelino's daughter by Agnes Este, his first wife, is also at Goito in attendance on Adelaide. *Sordello* and she meet as girl and boy, and she becomes one of the dreams with which his lonely youth at Goito is adorned.

Browning spells this name *Ecelin*, probably for easier use in verse.

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At Adelaide's death Palma discovers the real birth of Sordello. She has heard him sing some time before at a Love-court, where he won the prize; where she, admiring, began to love him; and this love of hers has been increased by his poetic fame which has now filled North Italy. She summons him to her side at Verona, makes him understand that she loves him, and urges him, as Salinguerra's son, to take the side of the Ghibellines to whose cause Salinguerra, the strongest military adventurer in North Italy, has now devoted himself. When the poem begins, Salinguerra has received from the Emperor the badge which gives him the leadership of the Ghibelline party in North Italy.

Then Palma, bringing Sordello to see Salinguerra, reveals to the great partisan that Sordello is his son, and that she loves him. Salinguerra, seeing in the union of Palma, daughter of the Lord of Romano, with his son, a vital source of strength to the Emperor's party, throws the Emperor's badge on his son's neck, and offers him the leadership of the Ghibellines. Palma urges him to accept it; but Sordello has been already convinced that the Guelf side is the right one to take for the sake of mankind. Rome, he thinks, is the great uniting power; only by Rome can the cause of peace and the happiness of the people be in the end secured. That cause—the cause of a happy people—is the one thing for which, after many dreams centred in self, Sordello has come to care. He is sorely tempted by the love of Palma and by the power

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offered him to give up that cause or to palter with it, yet in the end his soul resists the temptation. But the part of his life, in which he has neglected his body, has left him without physical strength, and now the struggle of his soul to do right in this spiritual crisis gives the last blow to his weakened frame. His heart breaks, and he dies at the moment when he dimly sees the true goal of life. This is a masterpiece of the irony of the Fate-Goddess, and a faint suspicion of this irony, underlying life, even though Browning turns it round into final good, runs in and out of the whole poem in a winding thread of thought.

This is the historical background of the poem, and in front of it are represented Sordello, his life, his development as an individual soul, and his death. I have, from one point of view, slightly analysed the first two books of the poem, but to analyse the whole would be apart from the purpose of this book. My object in this and the following chapter is to mark out, with here and there a piece of explanation, certain characteristics of the poem in relation, first to the time in which it is placed; secondly, to the development of Sordello in contact with that time, and thirdly, to our own time, then to trace the connection of the poem with the poetic evolution of Browning; and finally, to dwell throughout the whole discussion on its poetic qualities.

1. The time in which the poet's thought and action are placed is the beginning of the thirteenth century in North Italy, a period in which the

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religious basis of life, laid so enthusiastically in the eleventh century, and gradually weakening through the twelfth, had all but faded away for the mediæval noble and burgher, and even for the clergy. Religion, it is true, was confessed and its dogmas believed in ; the Cistercian revival had restored some of its lost influence, but it did not any longer restrain the passions, modify the wickedness, control the ambitions or subdue the world, in the heart of men, as it had done in the eleventh century. There was in Italy, at least, an unbridled licence of life, a fierce individuality, which the existence of a number of small republics encouraged ; and, in consequence, a wild confusion of thought and act in every sphere of human life. Moreover, all through the twelfth century there had been a reaction among the artistic and literary men against the theory of life laid down by the monks, and against the merely saintly aims and practice of the religious, of which that famous passage in *Aucassin and Nicolette* is an embodiment. Then, too, the love poetry (a poetry which tended to throw monkish purity aside) started in the midst of the twelfth century ; then the troubadours began to sing ; and then the love-songs of Germany arose. And Italian poetry, a poetry which tended to repel the religion of the spirit for the religion of enjoyment, had begun in Sicily and Siena in 1172-78, and was nurtured in the Sicilian Court of Frederick II., while Sordello was a youth. All over Europe, poetry drifted into a secular poetry of love and war and romance. The religious basis of

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life had lost its strength. As to North Italy, where our concern lies, humanity there was weltering like a sea, tossing up and down, with no direction in its waves. It was not till Francis of Assisi came that a new foundation for religious life, a new direction for it, began to be established. As to Law, Government, Literature, and Art, all their elements were in equal confusion. Every noble, every warrior who reached ascendancy, or was born to it, made his own laws and governed as he liked. Every little city had its own fashions and its own aims ; and was continually fighting, driven by jealousy, envy, hatred, or emulation, with its neighbours. War was the incessant business of life, and was carried on not only against neighbouring cities, but by each city in its own streets, from its own towers, where noble fought against noble, citizen with citizen, and servant with servant. Literature was only trying to begin, to find its form, to find its own Italian tongue, to understand what is desired. It took more than a century after Sordello's youth to shape itself into the poetry of Dante and Petrarch, into their prose and the prose of Boccaccio. The *Vita Nuova* was set forth in 1290, 93, the *Decameron* in 1350, 53, and Petrarch was crowned at Rome in 1341. And the arts of sculpture and painting were in the same condition. They were struggling towards a new utterance, but as yet they could not speak.

It is during this period of impassioned confusion and struggle towards form, during this carnival of individuality, that Sordello, as conceived by

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Browning, a modern in the midst of mediævalism, an exceptional character wholly unfitted for the time, is placed by Browning. And the clash between himself and his age is too much for him. He dies of it; dies of the strivings to find an anchorage for life, and of his inability to find it in this chartless sea. But the world of men, incessantly recruited by new generations, does not die like the individual, and what Sordello could not do, it did. It emerged from this confusion in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, with S. Francis, Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, the Pisani, Giotto, and the Commonwealth of Florence. Religion, Poetry, Prose, Sculpture, Painting, Government and Law found new foundations. The Renaissance began to dawn, and during its dawn kept, among the elect of mankind, all or nearly all the noble impulses and faith of mediævalism.

This dawn of the Renaissance is nearly a hundred years away at the time of this poem, yet two of its characteristics vitally moved through this transition period; and, indeed, while they continued even to the end of the Renaissance, were powers which brought it about. The first of these was a boundless curiosity about life, and the second was an intense individuality. No one can read the history of the Italian Republics in the thirteenth century without incessantly coming into contact with both these elements working fiercely, confusedly, without apparently either impulse or aim, but producing a wonderful activity of life,

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out of which, by command as it were of the gods, a new-created world might rise into order. It was as if chaos were stirred, like a cauldron with a stick, that suns and planets, moving by living law, might emerge in beauty. Sordello lived in the first whirling of these undigested elements, and could only dream of what might be ; but it was life in which he moved, disorderly life, it is true, but not the dread disorder of decay. Browning paints it with delight.

This unbridled curiosity working in men of unbridled individuality produced a tumbling confusion in life. Men, full of eagerness, each determined to fulfil his own will, tried every kind of life, attempted every kind of pursuit, strove to experience all the passions, indulged their passing impulses to the full, and when they were wearied of any experiment in living passed on to the next, not with weariness but with fresh excitement. Cities, small republics, did the same collectively—Ferrara, Padua, Verona, Mantua, Milan, Parma, Florence, Pisa, Siena, Perugia. Both cities and citizens lived in a nervous storm, and at every impulse passed into furious activity. In five minutes a whole town was up in the market-place, the bells rang, the town banner was displayed, and in an hour the citizens were marching out of the gates to attack the neighbouring city. A single gibe in the streets, or at the church door, interchanged between one noble and another of opposite factions, and the gutters of the streets ran red with the blood of a hundred men. This then was the

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time of *Sordello*, and splendidly has Browning represented it.

2. *Sordello* is the image of this curiosity, and individuality, but only inwardly. In the midst of this turbulent society Browning creates him with the temperament of a poet, living in a solitary youth, apart from arms and the wild movement of the world. His soul is full of the curiosity of the time. The inquisition of his whole life, is "What is the life most worth living? How shall I attain it, in what way make it mine?" and then, "What sort of lives are lived by other men?" and, finally, "What is the happiest life for the whole?" The curiosity does not drive him, like the rest of the world, into action in the world. It expands only in thought and dreaming. But however he may dream, however wrapt in self he may be, his curiosity about these matters never lessens for a moment. Even in death it is his ruling passion.

Along with this he shares fully in the impassioned individuality of the time. Browning brings that forward continually. All the dreams of his youth centre in himself; Nature becomes the reflection of himself; all histories of great men he represents as in himself; finally, he becomes to himself Apollo, the incarnation of poetry. But he does not seek to realize his individuality, any more than his curiosity, in action. When he is drawn out of himself at Mantua and sings for a time to please men, he finds that the public do not understand him, and flies back to his solitude, back to his own soul. And Mantua, and love, and adventure

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all die within him. "I have all humanity," he says, "within myself—why then should I seek humanity?" This is the way the age's passion for individuality shows itself in him. Other men put it into love, war, or adventure. He does not; he puts it into the lonely building-up of his own soul. Even when he is brought into the midst of the action of the time we see that he is apart from it. As he wanders through the turmoil of the streets of Ferrara in Book iv., he is dreaming still of his own life, of his own soul. His curiosity, wars and adventures are within. The various lives he is anxious to live are lived in lonely imaginations. The individuality he realises is in thought. At this point then he is apart from his century—an exceptional temperament set in strong contrast to the world around him—the dreamer face to face with a mass of men all acting with intensity. And the common result takes place; the exceptional breaks down against the steady and terrible pull of the ordinary. It is Hamlet over again, and when Sordello does act, it is just as Hamlet does, by a sudden impulse which lifts him from dreaming into momentary action, out of which, almost before he has realised he is acting, he slips back again into dreams. And his action seems to him the dream, and his dream the activity. That saying of Hamlet's would be easy on the lips of Sordello, if we take "bad dreams" to mean for him what they meant for Hamlet the moment he is forced to action in the real world—"I could be bounded in a nut-shell and think myself king of infinite space,

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had I not bad dreams." When he is surprised into action at the Court of Love at Mantua, and wins the prize of song, he seems to slip back into a sleepy cloud. But Palma, bending her beautiful face over him and giving him her scarf, wins him to stay at Mantua; and for a short time he becomes the famous poet. But he is disappointed. That which he felt himself to be (the supernal greatness of his individuality) is not recognised, and at last he feels that to act and fight his way through a world which appreciates his isolated greatness so little as to dare to criticise him, is impossible. We have seen in the last chapter how he slips back to Goito, to his contemplation of himself in nature, to his self-communion, to the dreams which do not contradict his opinion of himself. The momentary creator perishes in the dreamer. He gives up life, adventure, love, war, and he finally surrenders his art. No more poetry for him.

It is thus that a character feeble for action, but mystic in imagination, acts in the petulance of youth when it is pushed into a clashing, claiming world. In this mood a year passes by in vague content. 'Yet a little grain of conscience makes him sour.' He is vexed that his youth is gone with all its promised glow, pleasure and action; and the vexation is suddenly deepened by seeing a great change in the aspect of nature. "What," he thinks, when he sees the whole valley filled with Mincio in flood, "can Nature in this way renew her youth, and not I? Alas! I cannot so renew

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myself ; youth is over." But if youth be dead, manhood remains ; and the curiosity and individuality of the age stirs in him again. " I must find," he thinks, " the fitting kind of life. I must make men feel what I am. But how ; what do I want for this ? I want some outward power to draw me forth and upward, as the moon draws the waters ; to lead me to a life in which I may know mankind, in order that I may take out of men all I need to make *myself* into perfect form—a full poet, able to impose my genius on mankind, and to lead them where I will. What force can draw me out of these dreaming solitudes in which I fail to realise my art ? Why, there is none so great as love. Palma who smiled on me, she shall be my moon." At that moment, when he is again thrilled with curiosity concerning life, again desirous to realise his individuality in the world of men, a message comes from Palma. " Come, there is much for you to do—come to me at Verona." She lays a political career before him. " Take the Kaiser's cause, you and I together ; build a new Italy under the Emperor." And Sordello is fired by the thought, not as yet for the sake of doing good to man, but to satisfy his curiosity in a new life, and to edify his individual soul into a perfection unattained as yet. " I will go," he thinks, " and be the spirit in this body of mankind, wield, animate, and shape the people of Italy, make them the form in which I shall express myself. It is not enough to act, in imagination, all that man is, as I have done. I will now make

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men act by the force of my spirit : North Italy shall be my body, and thus I shall realise myself " —as if one could, with that self-contemplating motive, ever realise personality.

This, then, is the position of *Sordello* in the period of history I have pictured, and it carries him to the end of the third book of the poem. It has embodied the history of his youth—of his first contact with the world ; of his retreat from it into thought over what he has gone through ; and of his reawakening into a fresh questioning—how he shall realise life, how manifest himself in action. " What shall I do as a poet, and a man ? "

3. The next thing to be said of *Sordello* is its vivid realisation of certain aspects of mediæval life. Behind this image of the curious dreamer lost in abstractions, and vividly contrasted with it, is the fierce activity of mediæval cities and men in incessant war ; each city, each man eager to make his own individuality supreme ; and this is painted by Browning at the very moment when the two great parties were formed, and added to personal war the intensifying power of two ideals. This was a field for imagination in which Browning was sure to revel, like a wild creature of the woods on a summer day. He had the genius of places, of portraiture, and of sudden flashes of action and passion ; and the time of which he wrote supplied him with full matter for these several capacities of genius.

When we read in *Sordello* of the fierce outbursts of war in the cities of North Italy, we know that

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Browning saw them with his eyes and shared their fury and delight. Verona is painted in the first book just as the news arrives that her prince is captive in Ferrara. It is evening, a still and flaming sunset, and soft sky. In dreadful contrast to this burning silence of Nature is the wrath and hate which are seething in the market-place. Group talked with restless group, and not a face

But wrath made livid, for among them were
Death's staunch purveyors, such as have in care
To feast him. Fear had long since taken root
In every breast, and now these crushed its fruit,
The ripe hate, like a wine ; to note the way
It worked while each grew drunk ! Men grave and grey
Stood, with shut eyelids, rocking to and fro,
Letting the silent luxury trickle slow
About the hollows where a heart should be ,
But the young gulped with a delirious glee
Some foretaste of their first debauch in blood
At the fierce news.

Step by step the varying passions, varying with the men of the varied cities of the League assembled at Verona, are smitten out on the anvil of Browning's imagination. Better still is the continuation of the same scene in the third book, when the night has come, and the raging of the people, reaching its height, declares war. Palma and Sordello, 'who are in the palace looking on the square, lean out to see and hear. On the black balcony beneath them, in the still air, amid a gush of torch-fire, the grey-haired counsellors harangue the people ;

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then

Sea-like that people surging to and fro
Shouted, "Hale forth the carroch—trumpets, ho,
A flourish! Run it in the ancient grooves!
Back from the bell! Hammer—that whom behoves
May hear the League is up!

Then who will may read the dazzling account of the streets of Ferrara thick with corpses; of Padua, of Bassano streaming blood; of the wells chokeful of carrion, of him who catches in his spur, as he is kicking his feet when he sits on the well and singing, his own mother's face by the grey hair; of the sack of Vicenza in the fourth book; of the procession of the envoys of the League through the streets of Ferrara, with ensigns, war-cars and clanging bells; of the wandering of Sordello at night through the squares blazing with fires, and the soldiers camped around them singing and shouting; of his solitary silent thinking contrasted with their noise and action—and he who reads will know, as if he lived in them, the fierce Italian towns of the thirteenth century.

Nor is his power less when he describes the solitary silent places of mediæval castles, palaces, and their rooms; of the long, statue-haunted, cypress-avenued gardens, a waste of flowers and wild undergrowth. We wander, room by room, through Adelaide's castle at Goito, we see every beam in the ceiling, every figure on the tapestry; we walk with Browning through the dark passages into the dim-lighted chambers of the town palace at Verona, and hang over its balconies; we know the gardens at Goito, and the lonely woods; and

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we keep pace with *Sordello* through these desolate paths and flex-groves, past the fountains lost in the wilderness of foliage, climbing from terrace to terrace, where the broken statues, swarming with wasps, gleam among the leering aloes and the undergrowth, in the garden that Salinguerra made for his Sicilian wife at Ferrara. The words seem as it were to flare the ancient places out before the eyes.

Mixed up with all this painting of towns, castles and gardens there is some natural description. Browning endeavours, it is plain, to keep that within the mediæval sentiment. But that he should succeed in that was impossible. The mediæval folk had little of our specialised sentiment for landscape, and Browning could not get rid of it.

The modern philosophies of Nature do not, however, appear in *Sordello* as they did in *Pauline* or *Paracelsus*. Only once in the whole of *Sordello* is Nature conceived as in analogy with man, and Browning says this in a parenthesis. "Life is in the tempest," he cries, "thought

"Clothes the keen hill top, mid day woods are fraught
With fervours",

but, in spite of the mediæval environment, the modern way of seeing Nature enters into all his descriptions. They are none the worse for it, and do not jar too much with the mediæval *mise-en-scène*. We expect our modern sentiment, and *Sordello* himself, being in many ways a modern.

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seems to license these descriptions. Most of them also occur when he is on the canvas, and are a background to his thought. Moreover, they are not set descriptions; they are flashed out, as it were, in a few lines, as if they came by chance, and are not pursued into detail. Indeed, they are not done so much for the love of Nature herself, as for passing illustrations of Sordello's ways of thought and feeling upon matters which are not Nature. As such, even in a mediæval poem, they are excusable. And vivid they are in colour, in light, in reality. Some I have already isolated. Here are a few more, just to show his hand. This is the castle and its scenery, described in Book 1. .

In Mantua territory half is slough,
Half pine-tree forest—maples, scarlet oaks
Breed o'er the river beds—even Mincio chokes
With sand the summer through—but 'tis morass
In winter up to Mantua's wall. There was,
Some thirty years before this evening's coil
One spot reclaimed from the surrounding spoil
Gorto, just a castle built amid
A few low mountains—firs and larches hid
Their main defiles and rings of vineyard bound
The rest—Some captured creature in a pound,
Whose artless wonder quite precludes distress,
Secure beside in its own loveliness,
So peered with airy head, below, above
The castle at its toils, the lapwings love
To glean among at grape-time

And this is the same place from the second book :

And thus he wandered, dumb
Till evening, when he paused, thoroughly spent
On a blind hill-top—down the gorge he went,
Yielding himself up as to an embrace.

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The moon came out ; like features of a face,
A querulous fraternity of pines,
Sad blackthorn clumps, leafless and grovelling vines
Also came out, made gradually up
The picture ; 'twas Gorto's mountain-cup
And castle.

And here, from Book iii., is Spring when Palma,
dreaming of the man she can love, cries that the
waking earth is in a thrill to welcome him—

“ Waits he not the waking year ?
His almond-blossoms must be honey-ripe
By this ; to welcome him fresh runnels stripe
The thawed ravines ; because of him the wind
Walks like a herald.”

This is May from Book ii. ; and afterwards, in
the third book, the months from Spring to Summer

My own month came ;
'Twas a sunrise of blossoming and May.
Beneath a flowering laurel thicket lay
Sordello ; each new sprinkle of white stars
That smell fainter of wine than Massic jars
Dug up at Baiæ, when the south wind shed
The ripest, made him happier. •

Not any strollings now at even-close
Down the field path, Sordello ! by thorn-rows
Alive with lamp-flies, swimming spots of fire
And dew, outlining the black cypress-spire
She waits you at, Elys, who heard you first
Woo her, the snow month through, but, ere she durst
Answer 'twas April. Linden-flower-time long
Her eyes were on the ground ; 'tis July, strong
Now ; and, because white dust-clouds overwhelm
The woodside, here, or by the village elm
That holds the moon, she meets you, somewhat pale.

And here are two pieces of the morning, one of
the wide valley of Naples ; another with which the

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poem ends, pure modern, for it does not belong to Sordello's time, but to our own century. This is from the fourth book—

Broke

Morning o'er earth, he yearned for all it woke—
From the volcano's vapour-flag, winds hoist
Black o'er the spread of sea,—down to the moist
Dale's silken barley-spikes sullied with rain,
Swayed earthwards, heavily to rise again

And this from the last book -

Lo on a heathy brown and nameless hill
By sparkling Asolo, in mist and chill,
Morning jut up higher and higher runs
A child barefoot and rosy See! the sun's
On the square castle's inner-court's low wall
Like the chime of some extinct animal
Half-turned to earth and flowers; and through the haze
(Save where some slender patches of grey maize
Are to be over-leaped) that boy has crossed
The whole hill-side of dew and powder-frost
Matting the balm and mountain camomile
Up and up goes he, singing all the while
Some unintelligible words to beat
The lark, God's poet, swooning at his feet.

As alive, and even clearer in outline than these natural descriptions, are the portraits in *Sordello* of the people of the time. No one can mistake them for modern folk. I do not speak of the portrait of Sordello—that is chiefly of the soul, not of the body—but of the personages who fill the background, the heads of noble houses, the warriors, priests, soldiers, singers, the women, and chiefly Adelaide and Palma. These stand before us as Tintoret or Veronese might have painted

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them had they lived on into the great portrait-century. Their dress, their attitudes, their sudden gestures, their eyes, hair, the trick of their mouths, their armour, how they walked and talked and read and wrote, are all done in quick touches and jets of colour. Each is distinct from the others, each a type. A multitude of cabinet sketches of men are made in the market-places, in castle rooms, on the roads, in the gardens, on the bastions of the towns. Take as one example the Pope's Legate :

With eyes, like fresh-blown thrush-eggs on a thread,
Faint-blue and loosely floating in his head,
Large tongue, moist open mouth, and this long while
That owner of the idiotic smile
Serves them !

Nor does Browning confine himself to personages of Sordello's time. There are admirable portraits, but somewhat troubled by unnecessary matter, of Dante, of Charlemagne, of Hildebrand. One elaborate portrait is continued throughout the poem. It is that of Salinguerra, the man of action as contrasted with Sordello the dreamer. Much pains are spent on this by Browning. We see him first in the streets of Ferrara.

Men understood
Living was pleasant to him as he wore "
His careless surcoat, glanced some massive o'er,
Propped on his truncheon in the public way.

Then, at the games at Mantua, when he is told
Sordello will not come to sing a welcome to him,
What cares he for poet's whims ?

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The easy-natured soldier smiled assent,
Settled his portly person, smoothed his chin
And nodded that the bull bait might begin

Then mad with fighting frenzy in the sacking of
Vicenza, then in his palace nursing his scheme to
make the Emperor predominant, then pacing like
a lion, hot with hope of mastering all Italy, when
he finds out that Sordello is his son — hands
clenched, head erect, pursuing his discourse —
crimson ear, eyeballs suffused, temples full
fraught."

Then in the fourth book there is a long portrait
of him which I quote as a full specimen of the
power with which Browning could paint a partisan
of the thirteenth century. Though sixty years old,
Salanguerra looked like a youth—

So agile quick
And graceful turned the head on the broad chest
Encased in phant steel his constant vest
Whence split the sun off in a spray of fire
Across the room and loosened of its tire
Of steel that head let breathe the comely brown
Large massive locks discoloured as if a crown
Encircled them so frayed the basnet where
A sharp white line divided clean the hair,
Glossy above, glossy below if swept
Curling and fine about a brow thus kept
Calm, laid coat upon coat, marble and sound
This was the mystic mark the Tuscan found,
Mused of turned over books about Square-faced,
No lion more, two vivid eyes, enchased
In hollows filled with many a shade and streak
Settling from the bold nose and bearded cheek
Nor nught the half-smile reach them, that deformed
A lip supremely perfect else—unwarmed,
Unwidened, less or more, indifferent

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Whether on trees or men his thoughts were bent,
Thoughts rarely, after all, in trim and train
As now a period was fulfilled again :
Of such, a series made his life, compressed
In each, one story serving for the rest.

This is one example of a gallery of vivid portraiture in all Browning's work, such as Carlyle only in the nineteenth century has approached in England. It is not a national, but an international gallery of portraits. The greater number of the portraits are Italian, and they range over all classes of society from the Pope to the peasant. Even Bishop Blougram has the Italian subtlety, and, like the Monsignore in *Pippa Passes*, something of the politic morality of Machiavelli. But Israel, Greece, France, Spain, Germany, and the days before the world was brought together, furnish him with men drawn as alive. He has painted their souls; but others have done this kind of painting as well, if not so minutely. But no others have painted so livingly the outside of men—their features one by one, their carriage, their gestures, their clothing, their walk, their body. All the colours of their dress and eyes and lips are given. We see them live and move and have their being. It is the same with his women, but I keep these for further treatment.

4. The next thing I have to say about *Sordello* concerns what I call its illustrative episodes. Browning, wishing to illuminate his subject, sometimes darts off from it into an elaborate simile as Homer does. But in Homer the simile is

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carefully set, and explained to be a comparison. It is not mixed up with the text. It is short, rarely reaching more than ten lines. In Browning, it is glided into without any preparation, and at first seems part of the story. Nor are we always given any intimation of its end. And Browning is led away by his imaginative pleasure in its invention to work it up with adventitious ornament of colour and scenery; having, in his excitement of invention, lost all power of rejecting any additional touch which occurs to him, so that the illustration, swelling out into a preposterous length, might well be severed from the book and made into a separate poem. Moreover, these long illustrations are often but faintly connected with the subject they are used to illumine; and they delay the movement of the poem while they confuse the reader. The worst of these, worst as an illustration, but in itself an excellent fragment to isolate as a picture-poem, is the illustration of the flying slave who seeks his tribe beyond the Mountains of the Moon. It is only to throw light on a moment of Salinguerra's discursive thought, and is far too big for that. It is more like an episode than an illustration. I quote it not only to show what I mean, but also for its power. It is in Bk. iv.*

As, shall I say, some Ethiop, past pursuit
Of all enslavers, dips a shackled foot
Burnt to the blood, into the drowsy black
Enormous watercourse which guides him back
To his own tribe again, where he is king;

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And laughs because he guesses, numbering
The yellower poison-wattles on the pouch
Of the first lizard wrested from its couch
Under the slime (whose skin, the while, he strips
To cure his nostril with, and festered lips,
And eyeballs bloodshot through the desert-blast)
That he has reached its boundary, at last
May breathe ;—thinks o'er enchantment of the South
Sovereign to plague his enemies, their mouth,
Eyes, nails, and hair ; but, these enchantments tried
In fancy, puts them soberly aside
For truth, projects a cool return with friends,
The likelihood of winning mere amends
Ere long ; thinks that, takes comfort silently,
Then, from the river's brink, his wrongs and he,
Hugging revenge close to their hearts, are soon
Off-striding for the Mountains of the Moon."

The best of these is where he illustrates the restless desire of a poet for the renewal of energy, for finding new worlds to sing. The poet often seems to stop his work, to be satisfied. "Here I will rest," he says, "and do no more." But he only waits for a fresh impulse.

'Tis but a sailor's promise, weather-bound :
" Strike sail, slip cable, here the bark be moored
For once, the awning stretched, the poles assured !
Noontide above ; except the wave's crisp dash,
Or buzz of colibri, or tortoise' splash,
The margin's silent : out with every spoil
Made in our tracking, coil by mighty coil,
This serpent of a river to his head
I' the midst ! Admire each treasure, as we spread
The bank, to help us tell our history
Arise ; give ear, endeavour to descry
The groves of giant rushes, how they grew
Like demons' endlong tresses we sailed through,
What mountains yawned, forests to give us vent
Opened, each doleful side, yet on we went
Till . . . may that beetle (shake your cap) attest
The springing of a land-wind from the West ! "

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—Wherefore ? Ah yes, you trolic it to-day !
To-morrow, and the pageant moved away
Down to the poorest tent-pole, we and you
Part company : no other may pursue
Eastward your voyage, be informed what fate
Intends, if triumph or decline await
The tempter of the everlasting stoppe !

This, from Book iii., is the best because it is closer than the rest to the matter in hand ; but how much better it might have been ! How curiously overloaded it is, how difficult what is easy has been made !

The fault of these illustrations is the fault of the whole poem. *Sordello* is obscure, Browning's idolaters say, by concentration of thought. It is rather obscure by want of that wise rejection of unnecessary thoughts which is the true concentration. It is obscure by a reckless misuse of the ordinary rules of language. It is obscure by a host of parentheses introduced to express thoughts which are only suggested, half-shaped, and which are frequently interwoven with parentheses introduced into the original parentheses. It is obscure by the worst punctuation I ever came across, but this was improved in the later editions. It is obscure by multitudinous fancies put in whether they have to do with the subject or not, and by multitudinous deviations within those fancies. It is obscure by Browning's effort to make words express more than they are capable of expressing.

It is no carping criticism to say this of Browning's work in *Sordello*, because it is the very criticism his after-practice as an artist makes. He gave

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up these efforts to force, like Procrustes, language to stretch itself or to cut itself down into forms it could not naturally take ; and there is no more difficulty in most of his earlier poems than there is in *Paracelsus*. Only a little of the Sordellian agonies remains in them, only that which was natural to Browning's genius. The interwoven parentheses remain, the rushes of invention into double and triple illustrations, the multiplication of thought on thought ; but for these we may even be grateful. Opulence and plenitude of this kind are not common ; we are not often granted a man who flings imaginations, fancies and thoughts from him as thick and bright as sparks from a grinder's wheel. It is not every poet who is unwilling to leave off, who finds himself too full to stop. "These bountiful wits," as Lamb said, "always give full measure, pressed down, and running over."

CHAPTER VII

BROWNING AND SORDELLO

THERE are certain analogies between Browning as a poet and the Sordello of the poem ; between his relation to the world of his time and that of Sordello to his time ; and finally, between Browning's language in this poem and the change in the Italian language which he imputes to the work of Sordello. This chapter will discuss these analogies, and close with an appreciation of Browning's position between the classic and romantic schools of poetry.

The analogies of which I write may be denied, but I do not think they can be disproved. Browning is, no doubt, separate from Sordello in his own mind, but underneath the young poet he is creating, he is continually asking himself the same question which Sordello asks—What shall I do as an artist ? To what conclusion shall I come with regard to my life as a poet ? It is no small proof of this underlying personal element in the first three books of the poem that at the end of the third book Browning flings himself suddenly out of the mediæval world and the men he has created, and waking into 1835-40 at Venice, asks himself—What am I writing, and why ? What is my aim in being a poet ? Is it worth my while to

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go on with Sordello's story, and why is it worth the telling? In fact, he allows us to think that he has been describing in Sordello's story a transitory phase of his own career. And then, having done this, he tells how he got out of confusion into clearer light.

The analogy between Browning's and Sordello's time is not a weak one. The spirit of the world, between 1830 and 1840 in England, resembled in many ways the spirit abroad at the beginning of the thirteenth century. The country had awakened out of a long sleep, and was extraordinarily curious not only with regard to life and the best way to live it, but also with regard to government, law, the condition of the people, the best kind of religion and how best to live it, the true aims of poetry and how it was to be written, what subjects it should work on, what was to be the mother-motive of it, that is, what was the mother-motive of all the arts. And this curiosity deepened from year to year for fifty years. But even stronger than the curiosity was the eager individualism of this time, which extended into every sphere of human thought and action, and only began about 1866 to be balanced by an equally strong tendency towards collectivism.

These two elements in the time-spirit did not produce, in a settled state like England, the outward war and confusion they produced in the thirteenth century, though they developed after 1840, in '48, into a European storm—but they did produce a confused welter of mingled thoughts

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concerning the sources and ends of human life, the action it should take, and why it should take it. The poetry of Arnold and Clough represents with great clearness the further development in the soul of man of this confusion. I think that Browning has represented in the first three books of *Sordello* his passage through this tossing sea of thought.

He had put into *Paracelsus* all that he had worked out with clearness during his youth ; his theory of life is stated with lucidity in that poem. But when it was finished, and he had entered, like Sordello from Goito into Mantua, into the crowd and clash of the world ; when, having published *Pauline* and *Paracelsus*, he had, like Sordello, met criticism and misunderstanding, his Paracelsian theory did not seem to explain humanity as clearly as he imagined. It was only a theory ; Would it stand the test of life among mankind, be a saving and healing prophecy ? Life lay before him, now that the silent philosophising of poetic youth was over, in all its inexplicable, hurried, tormented, involved, and multitudinously varied movement. He had built up a transcendental building * in *Paracelsus*. Was it all to fall in ruin ? No answer came when he looked forth on humanity over whose landscape the irony of the gods, a bitter mist, seemed to brood. At what then shall he aim as

* He makes a simile of this in *Sordello*. See Book iii. before his waking up in Venice, the lines beginning

“ Rather say
My transcendental platan ! ”

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a poet ? What shall be his subject-matter ? How is life to be lived ?

Then he thought that he would, as a poet, describe his own time and his own soul under the character of Sordello, and place Sordello in a time more stormy than his own. And he would make Sordello of an exceptional temper like himself, and to clash with *his* time as he was then clashing with his own. With these thoughts he wrote the first books of *Sordello*, and Naddo, the critic of Sordello's verses, represents the critics of Paracelsus and the early poems. I have experienced, he says of himself in *Sordello*, something of the spite of fate.

Then, having done this, he leaves Sordello at the end of the third book, and turns, beset with a thousand questions, to himself and his art in a personal digression. Reclining on a ruined palace-step at Venice, he thinks of Eglamor who made a flawless song, the type of those who reach their own perfection here ; and then of Sordello who made a song which stirred the world far more than Eglamor's, which yet was not flawless, not perfect ; but because of its imperfection looked forward discontented to a higher song. Shall he, Browning the poet, choose Eglamor or Sordello ; even though Sordello perish without any achievement ? And he chooses to sail for ever towards the infinite, chooses the imperfection which looks forward. A sailor who loves voyaging may say, when weather-bound, " Here rest, unlade the ship, sleep on this grassy bank," 'Tis but a moment

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on his path ; let the wind change, and he is away again, whether triumph or shipwreck await him, for ever.

The tempter of the everlasting steppe.

That much is then settled for life and for poetry. And in that choice of endless aspiration Browning confirms all that he thought, with regard to half of his theory of life, in *Paracelsus*. This is his first thought for life, and it is embodied in the whole of Sordello's career. Sordello is never content with earth, either when he is young, or when he passes into the world, or when he dies not having attained or been already perfect—a thought which is as much at the root of romanticism as of Christianity. Then comes the further question : To whom shall I dedicate the service of my art ? Who shall be my motive, the Queen whom I shall love and write of ; and he thinks of Sordello who asks that question and who, for the time, answers "Palma," that is, the passion of love.

"But now, shall I, Browning, take as my Queen"—and he symbolises his thought in the girls he sees in the boats from his palace steps—"that girl from Bassano, or from Asolo, or her from Padua ; that is, shall I write of youth's love, of its tragic or its comedy, of its darkness, joy and beauty only ? No, he answers, not of that stuff shall I make my work, but of that sad dishevelled ghost of a girl, half in rags, with eyes inveterately full of tears ; of wild, worn, care-bitten, ravishing,

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piteous, and pitiful Humanity, who begs of me and offers me her faded love in the street corners. She shall be my Queen, the subject of my song, the motive of my poetry. She may be guilty, warped awry from her birth, and now a tired harlotry ; but she shall rest on my shoulder and I shall comfort her. She is false, mistaken, degraded, ignorant, but she moves blindly from evil to good, and from lies to truth, and from ignorance to knowledge, and from all to love ; and all her errors prove that she has another world in which, the errors being worked through, she will develop into perfectness. Slowly she moves, step by step ; but not a millionth part is here done of what she will do at last. That is the matter of my poetry, which, in its infinite change and hopes, I shall express in my work. I shall see it, say what I have seen, and it may be

Impart the gift of seeing to the rest.

Therefore I have made Sordello, thus far, with all his weakness and wrong—

moulded, made anew

A Man, and give him to be turned and tried,
Be angry with or pleased at."

And then Browning severs himself from Sordello. After this retirement of thought into himself, described as taking place in Venice during an hour, but I dare say ranging over half a year in reality, he tells the rest of Sordello's story from the outside, as a spectator and describer.

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Browning has now resolved to dedicate his art, which is his life, to love of Humanity, of that pale dishevelled girl, unlovely and lovely, evil and good ; and to tell the story of individual men and women, and of as many as possible ; to paint the good which is always mixed with their evil ; to show that their failures and sins point to a success and goodness beyond, because they emerged from aspiration, and aspiration from the divinity at the root of human nature. But to do this, a poet must not live like Sordello, in abstractions, nor shrink from the shock of men and circumstance, nor refuse to take men and life as they are—but throw himself into the vital present, with its difficulties, baffling elements and limitations ; take its failures for its own ; go through them while he looks beyond them, and, because he looks beyond them, never lose hope, or retreat from life, or cease to fight his way onward. And, to support him in this, there is but one thing—infinite love, pity, and sympathy for mankind, increased, not lessened by knowledge of the sins and weakness, the failure and despairs of men. This is Browning's second thought for life. But this is the very thing Sordello, as conceived by Browning, did not and could not do. He lived in abstractions and in himself ; he tried to discard his human nature, or to make it bear more than it could bear. He threw overboard the natural physical life of the body because it limited, he thought, the outgoings of the imaginative soul, and only found that in weakening the body he enfeebled the soul. At every point he resented the limits of

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human life and fought against them. Neither would he live in the world allotted to him, nor among the men of his time, nor in its turmoil ; but only in imagination of his own inner world, among men whom he created for himself, of which world he was to be sole king. He had no love for men ; they wearied, jarred, and disturbed his ideal world. All he wanted was their applause or their silence, not their criticism, not their affection. And of course human love and sympathy for men and insight into them, departed from him, and with them his art departed. He never became a true poet.

It is this failure, passing through several phases of life in which action is demanded of Sordello, that Browning desired to record in the last three books of the poem. And he thinks it worth doing because it is human, and the record of what is human is always of worth to man. He paints Sordello's passage through phase after phase of thought and act in the outside world, in all of which he seems for the moment to succeed or to touch the verge of success, but in which his neglect of the needs of the body and the discontentment of his soul produce failure. At last, at the very moment of death, he knows why he failed, and sees, as through a glass darkly, the failure making the success of the world to come. The revelation breaks his heart.

And now what is the end, what is the result for man of this long striving of Sordello ? Nothing ! Nothing has been done. Yet no, there is one result,

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The imperfect song he made when he was young at Goito, in the flush of happiness, when he forgot himself in love of nature and of the young folk who wandered rejoicing through the loveliness of nature—that song is still alive, not in the great world among the noble women and warriors of the time, but on the lips of the peasant girls of Asolo who sing it on dewy mornings when they climb the castle hill. This is the outcome of Sordello's life, and it sounds like irony on Browning's lips. It is not so; the irony is elsewhere in the poem, and is of another kind. Here, the conclusion is,—that the poem, or any work of art, made in joy, in sympathy with human life, moved by the love of loveliness in man or in nature, lives and lasts in beauty, heals and makes happy the world. And it has its divine origin in the artist's loss of himself in humanity, and his finding of himself, through union with humanity, in union with God the eternal poet. In this is hidden the life of an artist's greatness. And here the little song, which gives joy to a child, and fits in with and enhances its joy, is greater in the eyes of the immortal judges than all the glory of the world which Sordello sought so long for himself alone. It is a truth Browning never failed to record, the greatness and power of the things of love; for, indeed, love being infinite and omnipotent, gives to its smallest expression the glory of all its qualities.

The second of these analogies between Browning and Sordello relates to Browning's treatment of the English language in the poem of *Sordello* and what

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he pictures Sordello as doing for the Italian language in the poem. The passage to which I refer is about half-way in the second book. As there is no real ground for representing Sordello as working any serious change in the Italian tongue of literature except a slight phrase in a treatise of Dante's, the representation is manifestly an invention of Browning's added to the character of Sordello as conceived by himself. As such it probably comes out of, and belongs to, his own experience. The Sordello who acts thus with language represents the action of Browning himself at the time he was writing the poem. It so, the passage is full of interest.

All we know about Sordello as a poet is that he wrote some Italian poems, while those by which he was famous were in Provençal. In Dante's treatise on the use of his native tongue, he suggests that Sordello was one of the pioneers of literary Italian. So, at least, Browning seems to infer from the passage, for he makes it the motive of his little "excursus" on Sordello's presumed effort to strike out a new form and method in poetic language. Nothing was more needed than such an effort if any fine literature were to arise in Italy. In this unformed but slowly forming thirteenth century the language was in as great a confusion—and, I may say, as individual (for each poet wrote in his own dialect) as the life of the century.

What does Browning make Sordello do? He has brought "him to Mantua" as the accepted master of song; and Sordello burns to be fully

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recognised as the absolute poet. He has felt for some time that while he cannot act well he can imagine action well. And he sings his imaginations. But there is at the root of his singing a love of the applause of the people more than a love of song for itself. And he fails to please. So Sordello changes his subject and sings no longer of himself in the action of the heroes he imagines, but of abstract ideas, philosophic dreams and problems. The very critics cried that he had left human nature behind him. Vexed at his failure, and still longing to catch the praise of men, that he may confirm his belief that he is the loftiest of poets, he makes another effort to amaze the world. "I'll write no more of imaginary things," he cries; "I will catch the crowd by reorganising the language of poetry, by new arrangements of metre and words, by elaborate phraseology, especially by careful concentration of thought into the briefest possible frame of words. I will take the stuff of thought—that is, the common language—beat it on the anvil into new shapes, break down the easy flow of the popular poetry, and scarcely allow a tithe of the original words I have written to see the light,

welding words into the crude
Mass from the new speech round him till a rude
Armour was hammered out, in time to be
Approved beyond the Roman panoply
Melted to make it.

That is, he dissolved the Roman dialect to beat out of it an Italian tongue. And in this new armour

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of language he clothed his thoughts. But the language broke away from his thoughts neither expressed them nor made them clear. The people failed to understand his thought, and at the new ways of using language the critics sneered. "Do get back," they said, "to the simple human heart and tell its tales in the simple language of the people."

I do not think that the analogy can be missed. Browning is really describing—with, perhaps, a half-scornful reference to his own desire for public appreciation—what he tried to do in *Sordello* for the language in which his poetry was to be written. I have said that when he came to write *Sordello* his mind had fallen back from the clear theory of life laid down in *Paracelsus* into a tumbled sea of troubled thoughts; and *Sordello* is a welter of thoughts tossing up and down, now appearing, then disappearing, and then appearing again in conjunction with new matter, like drift-wood in a sea above which a cyclone is blowing. Or we may say that his mind, before and during the writing of *Sordello*, was like the thirteenth century, pressing blindly in vital disturbance towards an unknown goal. That partly accounts for the confused recklessness of the language of the poem. But a great many of the tricks Browning now played with his poetic language were deliberately done. He had tried—like *Sordello* at the Court of Love—a love-poem in *Pauline*. It had not succeeded. He had tried in *Paracelsus* to expose an abstract theory of life, as *Sordello* had tried writing on abstract imaginings.

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That also had failed. Now he determined—as he represents Sordello doing—to alter his whole way of writing. “I will concentrate now,” he thought, “since they say I am too loose and too diffuse; cut away nine-tenths of all I write, and leave out every word I can possibly omit. I will not express completely what I think; I shall only suggest it by an illustration. And if anything occur to me likely to illuminate it, I shall not add it afterwards but insert it in a parenthesis. I will make a new tongue for my poetry.” And the result was the style and the strange manner in which *Sordello* was written. This partly excuses its obscurity, if deliberation can be an excuse for a bad manner in literature. Malice prepense does not excuse a murder, though it makes it more interesting. Finally, the manner in which *Sordello* was written did not please him. He left it behind him, and *Pippa Passes*, which followed *Sordello*, is as clear and simple in style as its predecessor is obscure.

Thirdly, the language of *Sordello*, and, in a lesser degree, that of all Browning's poetry, proves—if his whole way of thought and passion did not also prove it—that Browning was not a classic, that he deliberately put aside the classic traditions in poetry. In this he presents a strong contrast to Tennyson. Tennyson was possessed by those traditions. “His masters were Homer, Vergil, Milton and the rest of those who wrote with measure, purity, and temperance; and from whose poetry proceeded a spirit of order, of tranquillity, of clearness, of simplicity; who were reticent in

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ornament, in illustration, and stern in rejection of unnecessary material. None of these classic excellences belong to Browning, nor did he ever try to gain them, and that was, perhaps, a pity. But, after all, it would have been of no use had he tried for them. We cannot impose from without on ourselves that which we have not within ; and Browning was, in spirit, a pure romantic, not a classic. Tennyson never allowed what romanticism he possessed to have its full swing. It always wore the classic dress, submitted itself to the classic traditions, used the classic forms. In the *Idylls of the King* he took a romantic story ; but nothing could be more unromantic than many of the inventions and the characters ; than the temper, the morality, and the conduct of the poem. The Arthurian poets, Malory himself, would have jumped out of their skin with amazement, even with indignation, had they read it. And a great deal of this oddity, this unfitness of the matter to the manner, arose from the romantic story being expressed in poetry written in accordance with classic traditions. Of course, there were other sources for these inharmonies in the poem, but that was one, and not the least of them. *

Browning had none of these classic traditions. He had his own matter, quite new stuff it was ; and he made his own manner. He did not go back to the old stories, but, being filled with the romantic spirit, embodied it in new forms and drenched with it his subjects, whether he took them from ancient, mediæval, Renaissance, or

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modern life. He felt, and truly, that it is of the essence of romanticism to be always arising into new shapes, assimilating itself, century by century, to the needs, the thought and the passions of growing mankind ; progressive, a lover of change ; in steady opposition to that dull conservatism the tendency to which besets the classic literature.

Browning had the natural faults of the romantic poet ; and these are most remarkable when such a poet is young. The faults are the opposites of the classic poet's excellences : want of measure, want of proportion, want of clearness and simplicity, want of temperance, want of that selective power which knows what to leave out or when to stop. And these frequently become positive and end in actual disorder of composition, huddling of the matters treated of into ill-digested masses, violence in effects and phrase, bewildering obscurity, sought out, even desperate strangeness of subject and expression, uncompromising individuality, crude ornament, and fierce colour. Many examples of these faults are to be found in *Sordello* and throughout the work of Browning. They are the extremes into which the Romantic is frequently hurried.

But, then, Browning has the natural gifts and excellences of the romantic poet, and these elements make him dearer than the mere Classic to a multitude of imaginative persons. One of them is endless and impassioned curiosity, for ever unsatisfied, always finding new worlds of thought and feeling into which to make dangerous and thrilling voyages of discovery—voyages that are filled from

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end to end with incessantly changing adventure and delight in that adventure. This enchants the world. And it is not only in his subjects that the romantic poet shows his curiosity. He is just as curious of new methods of tragedy, of lyric work, of every mode of poetry ; of new ways of expressing old thoughts ; new ways of treating old metres ; of the invention of new metres and new ways of phrasing ; of strange and startling word-combinations, to clothe fittingly the strange and startling things discovered in human nature, in one's own soul, or in the souls of others. In ancient days such a temper produced the many tales of invention which filled the romantic cycles.

Again and again, from century to century, this romantic spirit has done its re-creating work in the development of poetry in France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and England. And in 1840, and for many years afterwards, it produced in Browning, and for our pleasure, his dramatic lyrics as he called them ; his psychological studies, which I may well call excursions, adventures, battles, pursuits, retreats, discoveries of the soul ; for in the soul of man lay, for Browning, the forest of Broceliande, the wild country of Morgan le Fay, the cliffs and moors of Lyonesse. It was there, over that unfooted country, that Childe Roland rode to the Dark Tower. Nor can anything be more in the temper of old spiritual romance—though with a strangely modern *mise-en-scène*—than the great adventure on the dark common with Christ in *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day*.

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Another root of the romantic spirit was the sense of, and naturally the belief in, a world not to be felt of the senses or analysed by the understanding ; which was within the apparent world as its substance or soul, or beyond it as the power by which it existed ; and this mystic belief took, among poets, philosophers, theologians, warriors and the common people, a thousand forms, ranging from full-schemed philosophies to the wildest superstitions. It tended, in its extremes, to make this world a shadow, a dream ; and our life only a real life when it habitually dwelt in the mystic region mortal eye could not see, whose voices mortal ear could not receive. Out of this root, which shot its first fibres into the soul of humanity in the days of the earliest savage and separated him by an unfathomable gulf from the brute, arose all the myths and legends and mystic stories which fill romance. Out of it developed the unquenchable thirst of those of the romantic temper for communion with the spiritual beings of this mystic world ; a thirst which, however repressed for a time, always arises again ; and is even now arising among the poets of to-day.

In Browning's view of the natural world some traces of this element of the romantic spirit may be distinguished, but in his poetry of Man it scarcely appears. Nor, indeed, is he ever the true mystic. He had too much of the sense which handles daily life ; he saw the facts of life too clearly, to fall into the vaguer regions of mysticism. But one part of its region, and of the romantic spirit, so incessantly

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recurs in Browning that it may be said to underlie the whole of his work. It is that into which the thoughts and passions of the romantic poets in all ages ran up, as into a goal—the conception of a perfect world, beyond this visible, in which the noble hopes, loves and work of humanity—baffled, limited, and ruined here—should be fulfilled and satisfied. The Greeks did not frame this conception as a people, though Plato outreached towards it; the Romans had it not, though Vergil seems to have touched it in hours of inspiration. The Teutonic folk did not possess it till Christianity invaded them. Of course, it was alive like a beating heart in Christianity, that most romantic of all religions. But the Celtic peoples did conceive it before Christianity and with a surprising fulness, and wherever they went through Europe they pushed it into the thought, passions and action of human life. And out of this conception, which among the Irish took form as the Land of Eternal Youth, love and joy, where human trouble ceased, grew that element in romance which is perhaps the strongest in it—the hunger for eternity, for infinite perfection of being, and, naturally, for unremitting pursuit of it; and among Christian folk for a life here which should fit them for perfect life to come. Christian romance threw itself with fervour into that ideal, and the pursuit, for example, of the Holy Grail is only one of the forms of this hunger for eternity and perfection.

Browning possessed this element of romance with remarkable fulness, and expressed it with

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undiminished ardour for sixty years of poetic work. From *Pauline* to *Asolando* it reigns supreme. It is the fountain-source of *Sordello*—by the pervasiveness of which the poem consists. Immortal life in God's perfection! Into that cry the Romantic's hunger for eternity had developed in the soul of Browning. His heroes, in drama and lyric, in *Paracelsus* and *Sordello*, pass into the infinite, there to be completed.

And if I may here introduce a kind of note, it is at this moment that we ought to take up the *Purgatorio*, and see *Sordello* as Dante saw him in that flowery valley of the Ante-Purgatory when he talked with Dante and Vergil. He is there a very different person from the wavering creature Browning drew. He is on the way to that perfect fulfilment in God which Browning desired for him and all mankind.

Nevertheless, in order to complete this statement Browning, in his full idea of life, was not altogether a romantic. He saw there was a great danger that the romantic mysticism might lead its pursuers to neglect the duties of life, or lessen their interest in the drama of mankind. Therefore he added to his cry for eternity and perfection, his other cry: "Recognise your limitations, and work within them, while you must never be content with them. Give yourself in love and patience to the present labour of mankind; but never imagine for a moment that it ends on earth." He thus combined with the thirst of the romantic for eternity the full ethical theory of life, as well as

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the classic poet's determination to represent the complete aspect of human life on earth. At this point, but with many fantastic deviations due to his prevailing romanticism, he was partly of the classic temper. The poem of *Sordello* is not without an image of this temper, set vigorously in contrast with *Sordello* himself. This is Salin-guerra, who takes the world as it is, and is only anxious to do what lies before him day by day. His long soliloquy, in which for the moment he indulges in dreams, ends in the simple resolution to fight on, hour by hour, as circumstances call on him.

Browning's position, then, is a combination of the romantic and classical, of the Christian and ethical, of the imaginative and scientific views of human life ; of the temper which says, " Here only is our life, here only our concern," and that which says, " Not here, but hereafter is our life." " Here, and hereafter," answered Browning. " Live within earth's limits with all your force ; never give in, fight on ; but always transcend your fullest action in aspiration, faith and love."

It amuses me sometimes the way he is taken by his readers. The romantic and the Christian folk often claim him as the despiser of this world, as one who bids us live wholly for the future, or in the mystic regions of thought and passion. The scientific, humanitarian, and ethical folk accept that side of him which agrees with their views of human life—views which exclude God, immortality, and a world beyond—that is, they take as

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the whole of Browning the lesser part of his theory of life. This is not creditable to their understanding, though it is natural enough. We may accept it as an innocent example of the power of a strong bias in human nature. But it is well to remember that the romantic, Christian, mystic elements of human life are more important in Browning's eyes than the ethical or scientific; that the latter are nothing to him without the former; that the best efforts of the latter for humanity are in his belief not only hopeless, but the stuff that dreams are made of, without the former. In the combination of both is Browning's message to mankind.

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